

## Chapter 1 – Death

"BOY! GET DOWN HERE!" Vernon Dursley's voice resounded through the house as he shouted. It normally did.

"He's yelling again." Boris commented.

"So it would seem." Harry said, opening the door to his bedroom and sliding his hands into his pockets. "Let's go see what he wants this time."

Harry had been back home for a little over a week and he was already sick of the place. It was odd, really. Vernon had grown more irritable and furious in the past year, whereas Petunia had mellowed out considerably. All over Dudley, who spent most of his time up in his room, staring at a TV that was never turned off. Petunia brought up his meals and helped him eat, helped him to the bathroom and to bathe, and in general took care of her soulless son.

It was because she knew. She knew of Dementors. She knew what they did. She knew what the results meant. But Vernon? He still thought that Harry had done something to his whale of a son. No amount of talk would persuade him otherwise. Even through all his training, Harry still couldn't quite drown out the sound of his uncle screaming.

Harry grew tired of the man's constant yelling. One spell - one little spell - and he could silence the man forever. He could stomp about and pound on things as much as he wanted, but he would never speak again. The Ministry was in chaos still, with the new Minister still being decided upon. Things needed to change, anyway. The underage magic ruling needed to be lifted, or at least changed so that people could defend themselves. Harry felt that his uncle had been abusive enough in the past that he could simply lie to anyone who tried to tell him he was in trouble. People could be manipulated rather easily if one knew how, after all.

Bringing a hand from his pocket, he pushed open the door to the kitchen. Petunia was cooking and Vernon was sitting at the table, newspaper hiding his purple face.

"Can I help you?" Harry asked, his voice dry and bored.

"Don't you take that tone with me, boy." Vernon said, slamming his paper down onto the table. "Not after what you've done."

Harry glanced at his aunt and asked, "Is he really *that* stupid? Does he still think I cursed Dudley?"

Petunia didn't respond.

"Do *not* speak about me as though I were an idiot, boy!" Vernon yelled.

"Then stop acting like I was the one who removed Dudley's soul, you bloody walrus." Harry growled. "If I remember correctly, it was *you* who told him to follow me any time I left the damned house. If he hadn't been following me, he would have been safe. It's your own fault he's a shell, so don't you dare try and put the blame on me. I've killed once this year, old man, don't make me kill again!"

"Threatening me, are you? We'll see about that!" Vernon said, getting to his feet and stomping towards the phone.

"Oh? And what will you tell them? That a crazed wizard said he'd kill you if you kept abusing him?" Harry asked, smirking.

"DON'T USE LANGUAGE LIKE THAT IN THIS HOUSE!" Screamed Vernon, his face turning an interesting shade of puce. "I WILL NOT HAVE IT! DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Harry had his wands drawn in an instant, aiming them at Vernon's head. Harry was taller than his uncle now, though the older man still had considerable size on Harry. It didn't bother Harry anymore. His uncle didn't scare him like he once did. He could erase Vernon Dursley from existence with barely more effort than it took to *blink* if he so desired.

"Shut up." Harry murmured, amused as Vernon stared at the wands in terror. "Shut up and sit your fat ass back down. Sit down and let me tell you of what I've spent the year doing."

"I don't care what you've done!" Vernon spat, backing away from the phone despite his words.

"Oh, I'm sure you don't. But you're powerless, so we both know you'll listen." Harry said, sounding bored. "I've got a friend. A vampire. His powers were acting up this year. And most of the girls at school were following him around, unaware of what was causing them to do it. This extended to the girl I've proposed to."

Vernon snorted as he sat back down at the table. "YOU? Proposing to someone?"

"Combined with the nightmares Voldemort had been sending me," Harry continued, "I was left a nervous wreck. When I saw a vision of my godfather in danger, I didn't take the time to stop and think about it. I charged in. As a result, many good people, were killed."

"Good riddance!" Vernon barked.

"The woman who killed Sirius, my godfather, was called Bellatrix Lestrange." Harry said, advancing on Vernon, wands still aimed at the fat man. "I tore her soul apart. With every lash of my wands, I destroyed her soul more and more. What happened to Dudley? That was peaceful. What I did to this woman left her a sobbing heap. I impaled her with magical tethers. I slung her around the room like a rag doll. I pinned her to the wall and I caused her to disintegrate. Nothing but her blood remained."

"Your filth must not have good laws if you got away with that!" Vernon snapped.

"The Minister is missing and presumed dead." Harry said, smiling darkly. "We can hope, anyway. They're currently deciding who the new Minister will be. The way I see it, the Ministry of Magic is in enough disarray that I could get away with anything I jolly well want right now. See, there's a little problem. Azkaban, our prison, has gone missing. And if everything goes the way I think it will, that's bad news."

"So *what?* Why the hell are you telling me this?!" Vernon asked, glaring openly at Harry.

"So, it means bad news for horrible little piggies like you. Voldemort plans to make the island fly. Dementors, the creatures who took Dudley's soul, will be capable of striking anyone, anywhere, at any time. And no one would be able to stop them. Well... except me."

"Why you?"

"The way I see it, only two men are stronger than me in the whole of wizarding Britain. One is Dumbledore. The other is Voldemort. And I've got a few ideas on how the latter is going to meet his end." Harry explained. "The *point*, my dear uncle, is this..."

Harry closed the distance between the two, one wand jamming into his uncle's forehead, the other in roughly the vicinity of the man's heart. It was hard to gauge where to aim when there was so much flab. "...I could kill you right now and get away with it because I'm the only man alive capable of killing Voldemort."

"You're bluffing." Vernon said, eyes glancing between the wands aimed at him. "You can't. You'll be expelled! You'll--"

"Go to jail? I told you, it's been commandeered. And there isn't a court on this planet that would convict me, Vernon." Harry hissed. "We, wizards I mean, have a method of extracting memories from people. I could show the courts every instance of you attacking me throughout the years. It would be justifiable homicide."

"Stop it. Both of you." Came Petunia's quiet voice from near the sink. "I don't care if you two go at it all day, just don't do it while I'm around."

"He started it!" Vernon growled.

"I believe you were the one who screamed for me to come down here." Harry said. Then, putting his wands away, he nodded to his aunt. "I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia. I'll try and restrain myself better around the walrus over here. What was I called for, anyway?"

"He seemed to think I needed or wanted assistance with breakfast." Petunia said, moving to tend to a pan of bacon. "I told him I was fine,

but it seems my own husband believes you've done something to his wife as well as his son."

"Petunia, I--" Vernon began.

"Yes, you. You you you. Always you." Petunia said, turning to glare at Vernon. "It's *always* you, Vernon. Both Harry *and* I know more about what happened than you, yet I've had to listen to you rant and rave for a whole *year* about how it's Harry fault! You know *nothing* about what happened to my Dudley, yet the way you carry on, it's as though you think you're an expert on the matter! You don't know a thing, Vernon! Not a single *thing*."

Harry stared at his aunt, eyebrows up past his hairline. This was new. His aunt had never dressed his uncle down. Let alone in order to defend Harry. What the hell had brought this little outburst about?

"But... but Petunia, he... if HE HADN'T--!" Vernon began, his face turning colors again.

"If he hadn't contacted Albus Dumbledore, we might be like Dudley right now. That he even showed enough care to *try* and save anyone but himself says a lot, considering what he had to go through." Petunia said. "I've just about had enough of this, Vernon."

"What are you saying?" Vernon asked, the color now beginning to drain from his face.

"I'm saying that you'll be ranting to an empty house very soon!" Petunia cried, grabbing the pan of bacon and slinging it across the room. The pan bounced off of Vernon's head while the sizzling bacon within fell out en route and wound up on the floor and part of the table. Vernon let out a howl of pain, clutching at his head.

"You miserable little *bitch*!" Vernon growled, getting up so fast his chair fell over. He began to advance on Petunia, who stood her ground. "I will not be spoken to in such an insolent manner by my own wife! You will shut your mouth and do what *I TELL YOU TO!*"

"No she won't." Harry said. "And if you don't want to wind up splattered across the kitchen, you'll stand down and get the *HELL* away from her."

Vernon immediately changed directions, charging at Harry, who had drawn his wands again the minute his uncle had got back up. There was a spark igniting in Harry's eyes and, as he mobilized, he hissed, "Hold on tight, Boris."

Harry dropped into a crouch as Vernon threw a wide, telegraphed right hook. Harry aimed both wands at the ground and, as his uncle's punch ended, he sprang back up, bringing his wands up in a straight line and shouting, "*SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

Vernon Dursley was lifted off his feet and thrown back by the power of the spell, blood spraying from his body as he flew backwards into the sink. Harry's arms were in motion even as his uncle slumped to the ground, howling in pain once more. One spell and Vernon's pained yelling was stopped. Another and the man's wounds stopped bleeding. A third and the man lay petrified in a curled-up position on the floor.

"The abuse ends tonight." Harry stated, wands twirling as he tucked them away. He looked to his aunt, who was gaping at what she had just witnessed. "Are you alright, Aunt Petunia?"

"I... yes, I'm fine..." Petunia said, blinking finally and turning to look at Harry. "What about you? Is this okay?"

"Dumbledore will get me out of any crap the Ministry tries to send me. Like I said, they can always extract the memory and see for themselves that I acted in self-defense. I'll show them all they could ever want to see." Harry said, his eyes still glowing faintly.

"You really have become strong, haven't you?" Petunia asked.

"I have to be. Voldemort's chosen me to be his main enemy. I have a lot of responsibility on my back. Dumbledore could be capable of beating Voldemort, but I'm not going to place this on him. He's my burden. I'll take him out." Harry said.

Petunia glanced back down at her husband before closing her eyes and letting the situation sink in. She began to shake and had to lean back against the counter. "What have I done?"

"What you felt you had to." Harry said, walking over. "You'll be better off without him."

"That wasn't what I meant." Petunia said. Harry blinked in surprise when he saw the tears spilling from his aunt's eyes. "All this time... and you still protected me? Why? What did I do to deserve that? I never stopped him. I was never able to..."

"You changed." Harry said, interrupting his aunt. "And that's good enough."

Harry sighed quietly as his aunt wrapped her arms around him and began sobbing apologies against his shoulder. His own eyes closed as he hugged his aunt for the first time since he was a little boy. Things changed, but they could always be fixed, huh? He wasn't so sure. Petunia was used to an easy life. She would have to find a place to live and get a job, to say nothing about Dudley.

Opening his eyes, Harry hug tightened. He couldn't change the past, but he could change the future. His Aunt wouldn't do this alone. He was going to have a very busy day ahead of him.

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The letter from the Ministry came almost an hour later, quite slow for Ministry standards. It said all that Harry assumed it would - that he was in trouble for using magic when he shouldn't have, that he was to be expelled from Hogwarts, and that he was going to have a trial to determine his fate.

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen, Harry thought, tossing the letter aside and starting one of his own. It was addressed to Dumbledore and said, in fine detail, what had happened to him and how he planned to respond to it. This was the simple part. The hard part was how he was going to get the letter to the headmaster of Hogwarts. Hedwig was at the Tonks' house. He had determined Number Four simply wasn't safe for her, so her cage was to go back with Tonks at

the end of the year. The plan went through despite all that had happened. She had sent him a letter the day after she returned how, with Hedwig, telling him she was fine. It was short and to the point. She was clearly still mad at him.

Harry had taken his Aunt upstairs, where she had cried herself to sleep on her bed. After checking up on Dudley, Harry had returned to his room and waited. Now, he had to leave the relative safety of the house and travel to Number Nine on his own. The thought didn't make him feel very good. The last thing he wanted was to do any traveling alone. But he had to. And anyway, he had already broken the rule for underage magic - using it further to protect himself if he was attacked wouldn't matter much.

After finishing the letter, he put it in an envelope and left his bedroom. He checked in on both his cousin and his aunt one more time before heading downstairs and checking on Vernon. He was exactly where Harry had left him. The area around where Harry had attacked him was still covered in blood. Harry would get that cleaned up when he returned.

Slipping the letter into the pocket of his jacket, he slipped out of Number Four. It was a cheery day out, with no clouds in the sky and plenty of birds chirping and singing. The day was like the polar opposite of how things were *inside* the house he had stepped out of. He blew out a sigh as he headed for the sidewalk and began his trip.

It had felt good to finally cause his uncle pain. After so many years of living in fear of the man, Harry had finally been able to show his uncle who the *real* boss of the house was. He had long since come to terms with the fact that he didn't mind hurting other people so long as his actions were justified. And, as his uncle had put many scars on his body over the years, a couple of giant scars of his own would be a constant reminder to the man that would never hold power over Harry again.

He was thinking too hard, but that was fine. It was summer and the only things he had to worry about were Voldemort and where the hell Azkaban was. Naturally, Harry hadn't been kept up to date on the



Order's findings, if any had been made. Too dangerous. The letters could be intercepted.

Before he realized it, he was in front of Number Nine, staring at the closed door. Making sure his barriers were firmly in place, he rang the doorbell. A few minutes later and a familiar face greeted him, looking surprised.

"Harry? What are you doing here?" Tonks asked. "...Is that blood on you?"

"What? Shit, yes, it is... didn't even think to check that. Hope no one saw me..." Harry said, looking down at his shirt, which had a few large splotches of blood on it.

"What the hell did they do to you *this* time?"

"Uh-uh. Wrong way around. Uncle Vernon is laying in a silenced, petrified heap in the kitchen." Harry stated.

"What happened?"

"I happened." Harry said. "Double Sectumsempra up the front of his filthy body. He was going to attack Aunt Petunia. Who, as it turns out, seems to have taken my side at some point. I got a letter from the Ministry. Need to send one to Dumbledore."

Tonks blinked, stepping aside as Harry entered. She was wearing a bright, yellow dress to match her equally bright, yellow hair. "Is that all you're here for?" She asked.

"Don't."

"But..."

"Don't." Harry repeated, turning to face the girl as she closed the door. "Until you realize what's happened, we have nothing to discuss. The only reason I'm here is because this is where my owl is."

"Are you sure that's the only reason?" Tonks asked, looking down.

"I'm positive." Harry stated, turning and heading for the stairs.

Tonks looked up and watched him ascend the stairs, taking off after him when he neared the top. Before he could get to the guest bedroom that had been dubbed his over the years, she caught up. "Why won't you believe me?"

"Because I'm not affected by the magical charm powers." Harry stated, opening the bedroom door and saying hello to Hedwig, who hooted happily. "Fleur's didn't affect me. Leon's certainly don't. I can see clearly while you're probably still muddled. I've no doubts that the time away from *him* is helping to shake the cobwebs from your head, but it isn't enough. The blame lies mostly with him, but you *aren't* without fault."

"I don't love him, you know." Tonks said.

"I know you don't." Harry said, opening Hedwig's cage. "Okay, girl - take this to Dumbledore, got it? It's very important."

Hedwig nipped at Harry's finger as he took her to the window, opened it, and let her fly.

Harry watched the snowy owl fly off, his mind working overtime despite his attempts to slow his thinking down. The only thing that snapped him out of it was Tonks stepping up behind him and wrapping her arms around him from behind.

"Please. You don't have to go." She said, her voice very quiet.

"Do you admit you, along with half of the girls at Hogwarts, are under some form of uncontrolled, vampiric charm?" Harry asked.

"No." Tonks said. "Leon's the same as he ever was. A lot moodier, but..."

"Then I *do* have to go." Harry stated.

"I'm not going to let go of you." Tonks declared, her grip around Harry tightening. "I don't care what you and Parkinson have done. I want you back, damn it!"

"You know how to do that." Harry said, eyes closing. "It's very simple and yet you won't, or more likely *can't*, admit that you're being led on. Pansy and I haven't done anything more than you and I have. After Sirius was killed and I woke up, I made the decision that I needed sleep again. You refused to be there for me. I did what I had to."

"So what happens now?" Tonks asked.

"I wait." Harry said, shoulders slumping slightly. "Because it's all I know how to do. I can't find a way to get his powers under control. I can't convince you that you're being controlled by them. But I have to keep moving forward. I can't sit and fight with you two while he denies what's happening to him. I'll wait for you, Nymmy. But I won't wait forever. I can't wait forever. There's a limit to how much I'm willing to go through, even for someone as precious to me as you are. I'm sorry."

Tonks' grip tightened slightly. Harry could feel her shaking. He brought a hand up, putting it over Tonks' arms.

"What else would you have me do?" He asked. "What else *can* I do?"

"Take us back." Tonks said, her voice as shaky as her body.

Sighing, Harry tugged at Tonks' arms to loosen her grip enough to turn and face her. "This is a never-ending cycle. We're back to where we started. You know what you have to do. What do you want me to do, damn it? Hear you say you love me while you're tailing after him like a little lovesick puppy? I'm not willing to go through that! I'm the one that should be pleading to you two, if anything. To come to your senses. To grow up and realize what's happening to you. But I'm not. Because I'm not the one at fault. And I'm not going to beg and plead when I'm not the one in the wrong. If you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

Tonks had no response. Her arms moved from around Harry, one coming to wipe at her eyes. "I guess we'll both just have to wait and see what happens, then."

"Yeah. We will." Harry said. "...Nym?"

"What?"

"I love you."

Tonks' head came up in time to see Harry brushing past her, hands in his pockets. She watched him leave the room and, a moment later, heard the front door open and close. She stared at the doorway for awhile after Harry left before turning and sitting down on the edge of the bed. Taking a deep breath, she let herself flop backwards on it, staring up at the ceiling.

"I love you, too."

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"Dear Harry,

*While I do not approve of the methods you have used to subdue your uncle, I do not doubt that you acted in self defense. I will speak to the Ministry on your behalf. Perhaps you realized that, with Cornelius gone, I would have more pull with them than I normally would. You are becoming quite shrewd in your old age, if I may joke about at a time like this. I will come by to personally revive your uncle tomorrow, as I feel it would be the best course of action to take. I realize you may not approve of this, but we simply cannot leave him as a statue. I will tend to his wounds and, if I must, perform the appropriate mind charms on him to make him forget what has happened. This way, it will also ensure that he does not try to harm you or your aunt.*

*I realize you had to go to Miss Tonks' house to send this, and I ask that you not leave your house again. I fear the rift in your relatives' relationship may be causing a strain on the wards protecting you. No matter what you do, at least until I am able to stop by, please remain inside the house. I will be sending Order members over to help keep an eye on it, but we should not take any more chances than we need to."*

Harry finished reading the letter, which ended with Dumbledore signing his ridiculously long name, as he petted Fawkes. Looking down at the phoenix, he asked, "I suppose he wants me to send a reply?"

Fawkes let out a melodic trill in reply.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,' then. Alright, give me a moment." Harry said. Getting up from his bed, he moved to his desk and quickly wrote up a reply to the headmaster. Sticking it in an envelope, he held it out to the phoenix. "There we go."

Fawkes took Harry's letter, flew up off the bed a few feet, and disappeared in a burst of flames. Harry groaned as he threw himself back onto the bed, glancing over at the nightstand where Boris was curled up. "What do *you* think about all this?"

*"I wonder where he thought you MIGHT go after dark."* Boris hissed.

"I'm more worried about what he said about the wards on the house. I didn't think about that." Harry murmured, looking up at the ceiling.

When it was time for dinner, Harry went downstairs and made enough for himself, his aunt, and Dudley. His aunt was still up in her bedroom, probably still asleep. That was fine. She had taken a huge step forward and it had probably taken all of her energy to do so. It also helped to ease Harry's mind in regards to the wards on the house. If anything were to happen, having his family upstairs would make them easier to protect. Harry's room was closer to the stairs than his aunt's, and he would probably be capable of detecting anyone closing in. After so many years of people trying to kill him, he had almost picked up a sort of sixth sense on the matter.

Grabbing two plates' worth of food, he left the kitchen and headed upstairs. A quick knock told him his aunt was still asleep. But she needed food, so he opened the door and entered. She was still on the bed, on her side, just as she had been when he had left for Tonks' house earlier.

"Aunt Petunia? Dinner's ready." Harry said, walking over.

Petunia stirred, eyes opening slightly. "Dinner?"

"Yeah. You've been sleeping awhile. Brought one plate for you and one for Dudley." Harry said, holding the food up.

"And yours?" Petunia asked, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"In the kitchen." Harry said, handing the two plates to his aunt when she held her hands out. "Tell Dudley I said hi, yeah?"

Petunia nodded as Harry turned and walked out of the room. Dudley hadn't recognized anyone in months. But it never hurt to try. Harry headed back downstairs, took his plate over to the table, and sat down.

"Just you and me now." He said, glancing at the still-petrified body of his uncle. "Getting hungry? Furious at me? I know you can still hear. I know you can still think. You're probably wondering what you're going to do to me. I'm afraid to say, but you won't be doing a damn thing to me. Not when you get uncursed, not ever again. Because as soon as I leave here, I'm going to be visiting Gringott's. That would be a wizarding bank. I'm quite rich, see. And, as it's quite possible to convert wizarding money to Muggle money, I've got a few things I plan on doing.

"You see, Vernon, I hold a fair amount of sway in the wizarding world. I'm legendary, whether I want to be or not. And before long, that legend will probably get stronger. I do plan to kill Voldemort again, after all. Anyway, I hold sway. So I plan to help Aunt Petunia get a job once she leaves your worthless ass. Be it Muggle or wizarding, it all depends on what she wants to do. And you know what else I'm going to do? I'm going to get her a place to live. I have more money right now than you'll make in your entire, pathetic little life, see. She'll never have to worry about where she'll live.

"And I'm going to ensure that Dudley gets more proper treatment. Wizards haven't yet figured out a way to fix people whose souls have been taken, but St. Mungo's, our hospital, does a good job in trying. I don't yet know what kind of treatment he'll receive - whether they'll be able to send someone by regularly or whether he'll simply get a room there - but he'll get it, nonetheless. Because unlike you, I can forgive. It wasn't his fault he lost his soul. He was merely following your orders."

Harry smiled as he stabbed a bit of broccoli. "I could probably ensure that you never work anywhere ever again. In fact, if I do go on trial for using magic again you, I can guarantee you won't. You'll be homeless and alone, you fat bastard, while your wife and son are well looked after by the man you've spent over a decade torturing. How does that make you feel? I bet you're burning up, aren't you? I'll be there, you know. The day you die. And I won't offer you an ounce of help or comfort. I'll be there and I'll laugh as you draw your last breath."

Harry finished his dinner in silence, satisfied in the fact that Vernon Dursley was probably screaming incoherently in his own mind right now. It was one of the most entertaining things Harry had ever done in his life, taunting his uncle without the fear of retribution. His dinner had gotten cold during his little speech, but it didn't matter. He would ensure that his aunt and cousin were taken care of one way or another. She had proven herself worthy of saving that morning.

When he finished eating, he took his plate over to sink, moving so that he would have to step on his uncle as he went. Harry had no real plans for that evening, as the day's events had kept him from concentrating on almost anything else. Heading out of the kitchen, he decided that maybe, for the first time in years, he would sit around and just watch television like the normal people did.

Harry snorted at that thought. Normal people. People who didn't live with the constant worry of a Dark Lord coming to exact revenge. People whose families weren't dysfunctional wrecks. People whose love lives weren't needlessly complicated. *Normal* people.

Harry sat on the center of the couch and grabbed the remote control. The Dursleys watched a surprising amount of television, given that Vernon was strictly anti-everything. Imagination was something for lesser men.

There was very little on in the way of intelligent programming, so Harry flipped it over to a news channel and listened to the reporters prattle on about this and that for awhile. A part of him was hoping to hear some kind of strange story - one that the Muggles couldn't explain. One that might point out what Voldemort and his followers were up to.

But as the hours passed, nothing of the sort came up. Harry had heard his aunt moving about upstairs, but she never brought the plates back down. That was fine, he figured. She probably just wanted to get Dudley fed and then return to sleeping. It felt distinctly weird in the house, though Harry had been feeling that way most of the day.

Boris, who had been around Harry's neck most of the day, suddenly lifted his head. "*Harry? Do you feel that?*"

"Feel what?" Harry asked, staring at the TV.

"*Something's happening.*" The snake said, slithering around to look behind Harry. "*...I think you should check on your family.*"

"Are you getting paranoid in your old age?" Harry asked. "I don't feel anything. But okay, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Let's go."

Boris coiled back up around Harry's neck, facing backwards just in case, as the Ravenclaw got up and headed for the stairs. Harry quietly drew his wands as he walked upstairs. He still didn't feel anything out of place, but he knew better than to get complacent. Starting from his room, he made a quick sweep of the upstairs rooms before knocking on the door to his aunt's bedroom.

"Aunt Petunia? Are you awake?" Harry asked, knocking at the door again.

He got no reply, so he cracked the door far enough to peek in. His aunt was once more asleep, though this time she was under the covers and looked to be in her night clothes. Harry closed the door quietly and pocketed his wands.

"Satisfied?" Harry hissed softly.

"*No. Something doesn't feel right up here.*" Boris said. "*I just-- HARRY, DUCK!*"

Harry dropped down just in time to avoid a bright red burst of magical energy that had shot through the door to his aunt's bedroom. Harry



spun around and got back up as quickly as he could, wands back out and aimed for the splintered door, which was slowly creaking open.

"Boris?" Harry asked.

"*Be careful.*" Replied the snake.

Harry brought up a shield spell as he walked towards the now-open door. There were very few things in Harry's life that had truly caught him off-guard. This was one of them. He kicked the door open the rest of the way and stepped in, each wand aimed in a different direction. But there was no one there. His aunt was still in bed as though she hadn't heard anything.

Harry felt his heart skip a beat.

"No..."

He rushed over the bed and brought a pair of fingers up to his aunt's neck. Immediately, he turned and ran from the room, bursting into Dudley's bedroom. His cousin was laying on his side, facing the door. His eyes were wide open and unblinking. Harry didn't need to check his pulse. He knew just from a glance. His aunt and his cousin were both dead. Someone had broken in and killed them. And whoever it was, they were still there. Harry wasn't alone. Someone had shot that curse through his aunt's door.

"They're like rats." Harry whispered.

"*What?*" Boris asked.

"Death Eaters. No matter what you do, there's always more. They always survive, while I lose everything." Harry said, stepping out into the hall.

"*Harry...?*"

"Come out." Harry said, looking around at the seemingly empty hall.

"*Harry, we should leave.*" Boris said. "*It isn't safe here anymore.*"

"*COME OUT!*" Harry screamed, the air around him becoming magically charged. "Stop being cowards and face me man to man!"

"Do you really want that?" Came a deep voice from the far end of the hall.

Harry spun towards his aunt's bedroom to see a large man in full Death Eater regalia. His wand was in his right hand, which was at his side. Clearly, the Death Eater didn't consider Harry a threat.

"I'll kill you." Harry said, eyes narrowing.

"You'll try." Corrected the Death Eater. "You're outnumbered."

"*Harry!*" Boris hissed quickly.

"*How many?*" Harry hissed back, not taking his eyes off of the Death Eater in front of him.

"*Four.*" Boris said.

"You're going to die here with the rest of your family." Said the deep-voiced Death Eater.

"We'll see about that." Harry said, grinning maniacally. "You obviously haven't heard about what happens to people who piss me off."

"Do you really think you can beat all four of us before we kill you?" Asked the Death Eater. "I don't think you realize how powerful we really are."

"You killed a sleeping woman and a soulless boy. Well done. You're clearly big, tough men!" Harry growled.

"You insist on fighting?" Asked the Death Eater.

"This won't be a fight." Harry said, wands coming up. "This is going to be a slaughter."

## Chapter 2 – Grudge

"*IRATUS TRUCIDO!*" Harry yelled, whirling around and bringing his right arm up in an arc.

The powerful cleaving spell caught one of the Death Eaters full in the chest and knocked him to the ground, blood gushing from the giant wound the spell had caused. The remaining three leapt into motion at once, sending three hexes at Harry who, having no other real options in the cramped upper corridor, hurled himself towards the stairs.

He could feel his shield spells taking a serious beating as he landed, aiming back up and crying, "*LACER!*"

Several bursts of light emanated from Harry's wands, launching towards the first of the Death Eaters to come after him. The spells pierced the man's flesh, but he didn't cry out. Scrambling to get to his feet, Harry backed down the rest of the stairs, wands aimed up at the men who were advancing. One was staying upstairs, wand trained on Harry, while the other two began descending the stairs.

"Tom didn't feel like coming after me himself, huh?" Harry asked.

"You killed my wife. He gave *me* the honor." Said the first of the two Death Eaters on the stairs.

"Your wife? Ohhh, you were married to Bellatrix Lestrange, were you? Shame she said to explode so violently, isn't it?" Harry said, grinning at the Death Eater who had spoken. "She cried like a baby before I ended her miserable life."

"Shut your mouth, Potter!" Growled the lead Death Eater. "*AVADA--*"

"Lacer." Harry laughed, aiming down at the stairs under the man's feet. The green burst of light that came from the Death Eater's wand flew up and into the ceiling as he fell down into the cupboard under the stairs. Aiming up at the second Death Eater, Harry followed up with a quick series of cutting hexes, which bounced harmlessly off of a shield spell.

"*GET HIM!*" Shrieked the man who had fallen through the stairs.  
"*SKIN HIM ALIVE, RABASTAN!*"

Harry could almost feel the grin growing on the second Death Eater's face as he took aim.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" Cried the Death Eater.

Harry threw himself into the living room, dodging the Killing Curse just as the door to the cupboard splintered and the first Death Eater burst out. Harry whirled around the wall and pressed up against it, wand aimed at the doorway in.

"*Boris, would you mind terribly if...?*" Harry hissed.

"*Consider it done. No mercy, Harry.*" Boris replied.

"Thanks."

When the first man stormed around the corner, Harry's wand connected with his chest. There was a moment where nothing happened. Then the explosion happened and the man was violently flung back, slamming into the wall near the front door. The better part of his torso was missing and blood flowed freely from his body.

"*RODOLPHUS!*" Screamed the second Death Eater, rushing over to the body of the first. He quickly spun around and fired off multiple Killing Curse at the wall Harry had ducked back behind. "*DAMN YOU, POTTER! I'LL RIP YOUR THROAT OUT WITH MY BARE HANDS FOR THAT!*"

"Not bloody likely." Harry muttered. Then, louder, he taunted, "Is this the best Tommy can send at me?! The lowest of his men?! You're a bunch of cowardly weaklings!"

A guttural growl was the only answer Harry received. Moments later, the wall behind Harry exploded, causing him to tumble forward and smack his head against one of the tables by the couch. He blindly threw a shield spell up behind him just in time to prevent several hard curses from connecting to his body. Rolling onto his back, Harry

brought both wands up only to find the second Death Eater standing over him, wand aimed down at Harry's head.

"...What's your name?" Harry asked, not taking his eyes off the Death Eater's wand.

"Rabastan Lestrage." Said the man in a growl.

"Ah, I see. His brother." Harry said, nodding. "Terribly sorry. Would you care to join him? I promise it won't hurt for long."

"Don't you talk to me like that, you little rat." Growled Rabastan. "You killed my brother. You killed his wife. I'm going to kill you and avenge the *both* of them!"

"A murderer being upset that someone kills one of his own? Laughable." Harry said. "Tell me, Rabastan Lestrage... do you like trains?"

"What?"

"*TELUM CONICIO!*" Harry growled, jerking one wand up as he invoked the spell.

Rabastan's scream died in his throat as he toppled over backwards. One of the searing-hot spikes had caught him dead center in his chest. The other had flown at his head, piercing through the white mask he wore. As the bolts cooled down, blood began pouring up through the cracks in the mask.

Harry was quickly on his feet. Raising a pair of shield spells, he carefully rounded what remained of the wall. The fourth Death Eater still stood at the top of the stairs. His wand trained on Harry again as he emerged.

"Not coming to help your friends?" Harry asked.

"No one said we were friends." Said the man.

"Why haven't you come after me?"

"Waiting until they died." Replied the Death Eater, lowering his wand and heading for the stairs. As he slowly descended, being careful to avoid the gaping hole in them, he continued, "They've always been weak. Motivated by things like revenge."

"And you?" Harry asked, slowly backing towards the kitchen, wands raised, as the man reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I just like to kill." Said the man. Harry could almost hear his grin.

"Fantastic." Harry said, quickly opening the door to the kitchen and stepping inside, bringing the wand back to point at the tall man.

"Looks like you're having a fun time doing the same thing." The Death Eater said, stepping into the kitchen. "You would make a fine Death Eater."

"What can I say? I have no mercy for people like you." Harry said. "Kill or be killed. No sense in trying to take you people down with Jelly-Legs spells, after all."

"Shame you're going to die here." Said the Death Eater. "If you had only pledged your loyalty to our Master, you would have been spared."

"I'd rather be killed than serve him." Harry said.

"*Harry, watch out!*" Boris hissed. But the warning came too late. Harry tripped and fell to the ground, his head bouncing off the hard floor. He had tripped over the petrified body of his uncle.

Somewhat dazed from cracking his head again, Harry wasn't able to form a coherent enough sentence to curse his uncle out. He brought both wands up, aiming at the tall Death Eater, who was aiming down at him.

"Any final words, Potter?" Asked the man.

"Your name... tell me your name..." Harry growled.

"Why are you so interested in our names?" Asked the man.

"Morbid curiosity." Harry said, smiling darkly.

"Dolohov. That's all you need to know." Said the Death Eater.  
"Avada--"

Dolohov never got a chance to finish the Spell, as at that moment, a burst of green light shattered the window over the sink, connecting with the side of his head. Dolohov fell like a stone to the left, crashing to the floor in a lifeless heap. Harry just stared at the man for a few seconds before getting to his feet and turning to look out the broken window.

"The hell..."

A fifth Death Eater stood in the back yard, his right arm raised still. Keeping it trained on Harry's head, the man walked up to the back door and threw it open. Harry's own wands were raised by the time the Death Eater stepped into the kitchen.

"You killed one of your own." Harry observed.

"He was in my way." Came the reply.

Harry frowned. That voice sounded familiar somehow. "What do you mean?"

"Pretty stupid for a Ravenclaw, aren't you, Potter?" Said the man. "You had no idea the other four snuck in. You had no idea who they were. You have no idea who *I* am. You have no idea if the members of your stupid little Order who were on guard duty are alive or dead. You're pretty clueless, considering what House you're in."

Harry sucked in a breath. The Order members on patrol! He had completely forgotten about them. He knew that Dumbledore was keeping a few people around to keep an eye on the general area after what happened the previous year, but...

"The best part is the idiots we just killed? They had no idea what was going on, either. But I do. I'm not stupid like they were. The Dark Lord didn't send them here to kill you, Potter. He sent them here to see what you'd *do* to them." Said the Death Eater.

"Explain." Harry ordered, pointing both wands at the man's head.

"I don't think you're in any position to order me around." Said the Death Eater. "But, as I want you to realize just what you've been put through before I kill you, I'll acquiesce. See, Potter... the Dark Lord was intrigued by what you did to Bellatrix. He told us all - showed us all - what you had done. I must admit, I was impressed. That much anger and hatred pouring out of you. He wanted to see if he could replicate the conditions that invoked it. He sent those four here to sneak in, kill your family, and kill you. At least, that's what he told them. In reality, them killing your family was a ruse to see if you would fly off the handle again."

"Looks like his plan failed, then." Harry said, smirking.

"Yes, it seems so. I'll happily report to him what happened when I return." Said the man.

"One question." Harry said.

"Hm?"

"Who are you?" Harry asked.

"...Don't remember me? I suppose it has been awhile." Said the man. He brought a hand up to his face, taking hold of the mask that was covering it. He tugged it off and dropped it to the ground, revealing a very familiar face that was now covered in numerous scars.

Harry felt like all the air in his lungs had been forced out. "Terry...?"

Terry Boot grinned at Harry, raising his wand again. "Very good, Potter. Looks like you aren't a *complete* idiot after all."

"But..." Harry began, unable to figure out what he wanted to say.

"Why?" Terry asked, smirking at the shocked Ravenclaw. "Oh, it should be obvious, shouldn't it? It was all your fault, Potter."

"What do you mean?"



"Getting me expelled from Hogwarts. Forcing me to return home to my father." Terry spat, his face twisting in rage. "Forcing me to endure his punishment. But I refused. And I left his corpse to rot in that house."

"You killed your father?!"

"Should have done it years ago." Terry said, chuckling quietly. "Anyway, I had to live on the streets for awhile after that. Then I realized it was really my mother's fault that I had to go stay with my father. She was quite surprised to see me, actually. I was looking pretty ratty by that point. Of course, she let me in. Then I sliced her body in half. She was quite a screamer. I made sure I did it slowly, so she'd know the kind of pain I'd had to endure by being forced to live with my father."

Harry stared at the man across from him. This clearly wasn't the same Terry Boot he had known. That Terry Boot was a jerk who kept forcing himself on women and who kept getting himself into situations he shouldn't have. But to kill his own parents? And to take so much pleasure in torturing his mother?

"Harry?" Boris hissed quietly. Something felt odd about the Ravenclaw, but the snake wasn't sure what it was.

"It wasn't long after that that I heard. It wasn't difficult to join. Not when you know where to look. Not when they look into your memories to see if you're worthy. The Dark Lord himself told me I would make a fine Death Eater. He doesn't know I've come here, of course. But I never have been one to listen to orders. He keeps me because he likes my work, so to speak." Terry said, grinning maniacally at Harry, whose head was lowered somewhat. "So now what do you do, Potter?"

Harry's mouth moved, but what he said was too quiet. Terry narrowed his eyes and said, "Say it louder, Potter."

"I said," Harry began, his voice shaking, "That you talk too damn much."

Harry's arms swung downwards and he yelled, "*TELUM CONICIO!*"

"Oh no you don't!" Terry roared, bringing up a shield spell to nullify the Bolt Thrower. "You don't get to do that to me again! I still have the scars from the first time!"

"It was as much as you deserved." Harry growled. "Do you want to see for yourself what I can do now, Terry? Do you really want to see what it's like when I'm truly mad?"

"It would be nothing I couldn't handle." Terry said, stretching his arms out to either side. "Show me, O Great Harry Potter, what you're capable of!"

Harry took a deep breath, looked up at Terry, and lowered his Occlumency barriers.

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The door to the front of Number Four burst open some thirty minutes later. Albus Dumbledore was the first to enter, though many others behind him tried squeezing in as the headmaster stood in the doorway, observing the carnage around him. He took a few slow steps inside, turning and noticing a body missing most of its *body* behind the door. Not far away was a Death Eater with a pair of large spikes sticking out of him. The door to the kitchen was blown off and the crumpled form of yet another man was laying in there. And then, at the top of the stairs...

"Harry!" Dumbledore said. "Harry, are you alright?"

Harry sat, eyes half-closed, at the top of the stairs. He was positively coated in blood, his clothes shredded badly. He looked up when Dumbledore spoke, but didn't respond to the man. Instead, he lowered his head and continued talking almost inaudibly with his snake.

"Dear lord..." Said one of the other men who had just stepped in. Remus Lupin brought a hand up to his face to try and block the overpowering stench of blood and death that was in the air. It was potent to those even without his heightened senses. But to him, the smell was almost too much to handle. "What happened here?"

"What happened here?" Harry repeated, his voice quiet. "What happened here is that you people were too late. Again."

"We came as soon as we could." Said Dumbledore. "Our contacts--"

"Were killed. Yes. I know." Harry said, looking back up at the headmaster.

"Severus was late in getting back from a meeting. He was the one who told us they were in trouble. I regret not having put more people on duty..." Dumbledore said.

"Yes, you're full of regrets. Yet you never change." Harry said, getting to his feet. "You made me come back here every summer, knowing I would be abused. You never did a damn thing to change it. I'm sure you've regretted that, too. Doesn't change what's happened. Maybe you should step the hell down and let someone competent take charge. You haven't done a very good job of it."

"Harry!" Lupin said, eyes wide.

"Don't 'Harry!' me, Moony." Harry said, glaring at the werewolf. "All five. I had to kill all five of them by myself. My aunt and my cousin are dead. All because he regrets not having put more people on duty. All because he insisted that I return here because of blood wards that had already failed."

"I had no way of knowing how strong they were." Dumbledore said. "I would have inspected them tomorrow morning if all had gone well."

"Yes, yes. More waiting. I always have to wait. Sorry, old man. I'm not waiting for anything anymore. Not after this. You've officially lost the right to tell me to wait for anything!" Harry said. "It's your idiocy and fumbling that's caused this! Are you quite happy with your handiwork, *ALBUS?*"

"Don't take to him like that!" Cried one of the witches who had now entered the house.

*"I'LL TALK TO HIM HOWEVER I BLOODY WELL FEEL!"* Harry screamed. "Everything happens because he's too slow! Everything

happens because he's too bumbling to know how to do things *PROPERLY!* He's unfit to do *ANYTHING*, let alone lead a rebellion! I'd kill him myself if I thought I could get away with it! If he hadn't bent to Fudge's will, if he had *been* there last year, if he had *HELPED HIM INSTEAD OF JUST STANDING THERE, SIRIUS MIGHT HAVE LIVED* No... I'll talk to him however I want. After all the suffering he's caused me, he's lost the right to be treated with respect."

"Tell us what happened." Lupin said, walking towards the stairs and talking softly in the hopes that he could ease Harry down.

"They killed Aunt Petunia and Dudley, I killed all five of them." Harry said, looking at Lupin. "What's to explain?"

"How did they get in?" Lupin asked.

"Good question. Ask your perfect leader back there!" Harry said, motioning to Dumbledore, who had his eyes closed. "I'd *love* to know how they got in! Because they weren't tiny men! I should have, by all rights, heard them or at least felt them. I wouldn't have even gone to check had Boris not told me he thought something felt off! So I go upstairs, they're both dead, and I get attacked. One's dead up here, two down there, and two in the kitchen!"

"...Five? But Severus said that Voldemort only sent four." Lupin said, brow creasing.

"Oh, he did!" Harry said, hopping up and jumping over the railing halfway down the stairs. "The fifth was an old 'friend' of mine, come to pay his respect! Killed the fourth one, guy named Dolohov, then tried to kill me!"

Harry stepped into the kitchen, coming out a moment later with Terry Boot's body levitating behind him. When he had enough room, he flung the former Ravenclaw's corpse out in front of Dumbledore and company. "Good old Terry Boot. Evicted and forced to stay with his abusive father! Snapped, murdered his father, sought out his mother, tortured her during *her* death. Joined the Death Eaters, came here, and told me what Tommy-boy's plans for these guys was!"

Terry's body was horribly mutilated, to the point Lupin had to turn away from it. He was missing both legs and the lower half of his left arm was connected to the top by a few weak pieces of dangling flesh. He also seemed to be missing most of his face.

"This was all a test. To see if Tommy could replicate what I did at the Ministry. Terry thought he could beat me in that state. I killed him in under one minute. He didn't even have time to plead for his life. I lowered all my barriers and I showed him what he wanted to see. What Voldemort wanted me to do. I let out all my pain and anguish. Tell me, old man, do you like seeing the results of your ineptitude? Because if you had arrived sooner, you might have been able to save him from what I put him through. That's your thing, right? Saving people, only to put them in situations they can't stand?! Me, Terry, hell, even Snape has to spy for you to feel useful! And for what?! *FOR WHAT?!*"

"That is enough." Dumbledore said, raising his wand and quickly hexing Harry, who crumpled to the floor immediately. "Remus, get him to Andromeda's house. McAlister, Gunnry, collect the Death Eaters, try to identify them, and dispose of the bodies. Everyone else, work to make the house look like it should so the Muggles don't notice anything out of the ordinary when they wake up."

"What of you?" Lupin asked, hefting Harry up and over his right shoulder.

"I will be dealing with the Ministry for the next few days, I feel." Dumbledore said. "It is lucky for us that the Ministry is still a mess. I also need to figure out what I will do with Harry."

"Stop treating him like a little kid." Lupin suggested, stopping next to Dumbledore as he walked to the door. "He raised more than one valid point in his tirade."

"What would you have had me do, Remus?" Dumbledore asked wearily.

"Not stand there like a fish out of water while Sirius was disintegrated." Lupin said. "I obviously can't speak for Harry, but I was frozen to the spot. I couldn't do a damn thing even though he

was going to die. You're stronger than both of us. And what did you do? You stood there."

"I was fighting Lord Voldemort." Dumbledore corrected.

"Who had also stopped to stare at Harry, I might add." Lupin said, glaring slightly. "Are you trying to tell me that you couldn't have done a single thing to Lestrage to get her away from Sirius? I'm not a child, Albus. So don't treat me like I am. Harry isn't the only one sick of you insulting his intelligence."

With that, Lupin was gone, leaving Dumbledore and nearly a dozen other magical folk at Number Four to pick up the pieces.

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"Remus? Oh no, what's happened?"

"Harry gave Albus a severe talking-down to. So Albus, being Albus, knocked him out rather than deal with it." Lupin said as he entered the Tonks residence. "Where should I put him?"

"Upstairs. His room is the spare." Andromeda said. "What's happened, Remus? I only just got informed by fire that something was wrong."

"Long story." Lupin said, heading upstairs. "I'll tell you over some tea. Or stronger, if you have it. I don't want to think about what I saw in that house."

"What you saw?" Andromeda repeated, frowning. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Mum? What's-- oh no, not again." Tonks had just opened the door to her room, having heard voices outside. "What did they do to him?"

"They didn't." Lupin said, heading into the guest bedroom and laying Harry on the bed. After stepping back into the hall and shutting the door behind him, he looked back at Tonks and continued, "It's what he did to them."

"What? ...He seemed -- oh, is this about his uncle?" Tonks asked. "Yeah, he told me he what he did to *him*."

"His aunt and cousin are dead." Lupin said, sighing as he leaned against the wall near the top of the stairs. "Death Eaters snuck in and killed them. Harry killed three of the four. A fifth Death Eater took out the fourth. The fifth was Terry Boot, who is literally in multiple pieces thanks to Harry unleashing what had to be a horrible amount of anguish at him."

Both Tonks women stared at Lupin, who brought a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose. "Come on. Tea. Or stronger. I don't know the whole story just yet, but I know enough. I saw enough to be able to piece it together. Both of you now. Come on."

Lupin headed downstairs, Tonks slowly following behind. When they reached the bottom, Andromeda wheeled them into the kitchen. The werewolf had a bad feeling that there was going to be a lot of yelling ahead.

He turned out to be mostly correct. The younger of the Tonks women was more vocal about things. Andromeda seemed to simply be absorbing things and staying quiet about it. Lupin wasn't quite sure he liked that. But he got the story out and now they knew. Lupin only vaguely knew about the tangled web that was Harry's current life. Dumbledore had dropped little comments here and there about what changes had taken place. Even so, Lupin thought that the boy would do well with spending time with the Tonks women.

Nearly an hour passed before Lupin got up, saying he should probably head back to see how the clean up was coming along. Andromeda and her daughter got up to see him off, but the door to the kitchen opened before any of them could get to it. Harry was leaning against the door frame, looking like he had been run over by a truck. Repeatedly.

"Harry!" Tonks squeaked, rushing over and hugging him.

"Hey." Harry murmured. He glanced up and smiled crookedly. "You look like I feel, Moony. Wish we could have met on less... disturbing terms."

"As do I. I'm amazed you're even up. Albus' spell should have kept you out for at least a day." Lupin said.

"He pulls his punches." Harry said. "No surprise there."

"He's probably going to pull you aside to try and discuss your feelings, you know." Lupin said.

"Hang what he wants to do. It's about time I did what -I- want to do." Harry said, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the door frame. "He's getting in the way of progress. Has the Order found Azkaban yet?"

"I'm afraid not." Lupin admitted.

"And they've been scanning the skies?"

"Skies and seas. Nothing so far."

"So he may have a way to hide a floating island. Doesn't sound very nice to me." Harry muttered. "So what *has* the Order been doing?"

"Picking up the pieces. Reorganizing. Planning what to do next." Lupin said.

"I never did get a chance to apologize to you, Moony." Harry said, sighing.

"You have as much to apologize for as I do. Both of us were frozen there, Harry." Lupin said.

"I had the power to stop her." Harry said, shaking his head.

"It only surfaced when she... yes, well, it seems to only occur when you're truly upset. I'd say, if he was watching, Sirius felt properly avenged. Poetic justice that his killer died in the same manner by someone more skilled at using the spell."

"I think they may need to isolate for me for awhile, Moony." Harry said, glancing off. "I'm a bit unstable. I'm sure I can keep it all locked up with my training, but it isn't healthy. I didn't allow myself to grieve at



all. I haven't had time to mourn Aunt Petunia and Dudley yet. I haven't had time to sit and think about what I've done. What I know I'm capable of now."

"A bit fortunate that Azkaban is missing, I suppose." Lupin said.

"A bit." Harry agreed, smiling wanly.

"We'll see. I'll try and get to Albus before he gets to you. I agreed with you on quite a lot of things, you know. I said as much to him before I left with you." Lupin said, walking over and putting a hand on the Ravenclaw's shoulder.

"Always good to know someone thinks the same way. Makes me feel slightly less insane." Harry said, chuckling quietly. "Go on. If you don't head back, he'll come over here. And the last thing anyone needs is for me to go off on him again."

"Quite true. Well then, I'll leave you in the capable hands of Andromeda and Nymphadora." Lupin said.

"Oi!" Tonks protested.

"Good luck, Moony." Harry said, walking with the werewolf back to the front door.

"And to you." Lupin said. "...I don't blame you. And I've long since accepted the fact that he's gone. I hope you'll be able to should you allow yourself the time."

"So do I." Harry said, nodding slowly. "So do I."

"Goodnight, Harry. Try and get some rest. I can tell the effects of Albus' spell are still working their magic on you, if you'll pardon the phrase."

"Yeah. I'm gonna go lay back down." Harry said. "Night, Moony."

And that was that. Harry closed the door as Lupin left, leaning his head against it and letting out a low groan. "...Okay. Any questions?"

"Mum?" Tonks asked.

"No questions." Andromeda said, walking over. "I do have a request, however."

"What?" Harry asked, starting to turn around. He was stopped when Andromeda wrapped her arms around him.

"Let it out." She said.

"What?" Harry asked again.

"You said yourself that you haven't had time to mourn. Might as well do it tonight." Andromeda said.

"I'll be fine. I'll find a way to grieve on my own." Harry said, looking away.

"Nymmy?" Andromeda said, looking over at her daughter.

Tonks walked over and wrapped her arms around Harry as well. "We know you too well, y'know."

"And you should know we won't give up." Andromeda added, offering a faint smile before continuing, "We're all family here, Harry. Whatever's going on with you two - because my daughter certainly hasn't been forthcoming with any information - I know you can work it out. You don't need to hide in here. Let it out."

"I'll be fine..." Harry repeated, a little quieter this time.

"You don't have to do everything alone." Andromeda said. "Let us help you, if only for this one thing."

"I didn't even know they were in the house." Harry murmured. "If only I had been upstairs, I might have been able to save them..."

Andromeda's exchanged a quick glance with her daughter, who nodded in return. The two tightened their grip as Harry's eyes fell shut.

"Had to be quick because if I didn't..." Harry continued, his breathing starting to shake. "If I didn't then they would have gotten me, too."

Didn't have a choice in the matter. But then Terry showed up... he thought he could take me if I showed him what he wanted to see. Then I cut off his legs. And most of his arm. He died when he lost his face. Then I had to sit. And wait. And think. And think. And think..."

Harry was silent for a few seconds after that. "...I didn't say goodbye to Aunt Petunia. Or Dudley. Even after the fighting had ended. I couldn't face them. I'd failed to keep them safe..." He paused again, and both Tonks women felt his body begin to shake as well.

"I had dinner downstairs tonight. Sat there across from my uncle's body and told him that I planned to get them help. Told him I was rich and that I'd make sure they had good lives once they left him. And now they're dead. And he's still alive..." Harry trailed off. "...How? How is that fair? Why did they have to die while he continues to live? The one person aside from Voldemort who continues to make my life hell... and he's still alive while they had to die. *HOW IS THAT FAIR?!*"

Andromeda tugged Harry against her, with Tonks stepping in closer as well. Harry continued to yell for almost five minutes before his voice and energy gave out, leaving him a barely conscious, crying wreck. Andromeda had been expecting it to turn out something like that. Anger had a bad tendency to give way to depression. It was no different with Harry. His body eventually fell unconscious, leading Andromeda to levitate him back up to bed.

Tonks insisted on staying with Harry, saying she felt like she could help him if he woke up. Andromeda agreed, but said she would sleep with her bedroom door open, telling her daughter to call if she or Harry needed anything.

Tonks curled up next to Harry, tugging the covers up over them both. She laid on her side, simply looking at his face. He looked so much older than he really was. Tonks almost wondered if he was hiding any grey hairs using his Metamorphmagus powers.

"I'll be here." She murmured, curling up against him and offering a light hug. "Whether you realize it or not. I've...felt really weird all night, Harry. I think you were right.

...Sweet dreams, Harry."

Tonks lightly kissed Harry on the cheek and rested her head down on his shoulder, closing her eyes. It was pointless to do that, really. She knew as much. She had a long night ahead of her. Because while Harry probably wouldn't wake up, she probably wouldn't be able to drift off.

"Sweet dreams..."

## Chapter 3 – Going Home

Harry panted as he ran up towards the castle. All around him, the battle continued onward, rogue spells whizzing past his head. He had to get back inside. He had to know. He had to see what had happened to them. The last he had seen, they had been locked in combat. But he hadn't seen them yet. It meant they were inside. And that could only mean one of two things. He was desperately praying against all hope that he was wrong for just this once.

Bursting through the front doors and downing a slew of lingering Death Eaters, he raced towards the Great Hall, where the dead and injured were being kept. The doors seemed to react on their own, slamming open as he skidded to a halt, nearly falling over.

Solieyu's head raised, looking up from the body he was sitting next to. His eyes were glazed over and blood was still visible through the mess of hair partially hiding his face. His mouth tried to work, but it took awhile to get going.

"I did all I could. I... I was too slow. Harry..."

His words were drowned out. The world around them had faded. The only thing he saw, amidst the row of dead bodies slowly growing larger as the war waged on, was hers. Broken and bloody and motionless.

He took a step forward, but something stopped him. Skeletal-white fingers were gripping at his shoulder. He found himself being whirled around, coming face to face with Lord Voldemort, who wore a triumphant look on his face. "Come to admire my handiwork?"

"You did this."

"Of course I did. Now show me, Harry. Show me what I want to see." Hissed the Dark Lord.

"Don't do it!" Growled Solieyu, shakily getting to his feet. "We can still do this, Harry. Don't do it. It isn't worth it!"

"She has died because you wouldn't do one simple thing for me. How many more must die before you realize the folly of your ways, Harry?" Purred Voldemort.

"Harry!" Solieyu yelled, stepping towards the two.

Harry didn't see Voldemort raise his other hand. He didn't hear a spell being spoken. But the sudden flare of green light that shot past his hair followed by the hollow thump as a body hit the floor ensured that he didn't need to. He knew. And he knew what had to be done now.

Voldemort took a step back, a hideous laugh rising from his throat as the air around Harry became magically charged. The world faded to black around him, though the laugh continued, growing almost deafening, before his eyes shot open.

He blinked and immediately his vision became blurry. He started to bring a hand up, but one was being laid on. Turning, he saw Tonks, laying on her back but still trapping his arm, asleep next to him. Even in the blurry darkness, he knew it was her. The dream immediately came back to him and for a moment, his breathing stopped.

"Tonks?" He whispered, reaching out with his free hand and gently shaking her. When she didn't wake up, he shook harder. "Nym...? Nymmy? *Nymmy!*"

"Nn... whaaat?" Tonks whined quietly, stirring from her slumber. Then, remembering where she had fallen asleep, she blinked a few times and glanced over. "Harry? ...Harry, what's wrong?"

"You're alright..." Harry whispered, staring at the girl.

"What? Of course I am." Tonks said, frowning. "You have a night...mare...?"

Harry had put all his weight behind his left arm, tugging Tonks onto her side and into a fierce hug. His breathing was quick and ragged as he pressed his face against her shoulder. She frowned, but quickly returned the hug.

"Harry, it's alright. C'mon, you're awake now." Tonks said. "You're fine. What happened? What did you dream about?"

"You'd been killed." Harry whispered, not moving an inch. "You were laying in the Great Hall. Voldemort had killed you. He killed Leon. Then everything just... stopped..."

"No worries, then." Tonks said, smiling weakly. "I'm still alive and well. Sit up and take a few deep breaths, yeah? Want me to get you something to drink?"

Harry let go of Tonks, sliding his arm out from under her and sitting up shakily. "I... no, I'm fine. Just... don't go anywhere?"

"I won't." Tonks said, sitting up as well. "I promise."

Nearly an hour later, after laying awake and chatting quietly amongst themselves, Harry and Tonks drifted back to sleep. It had been around three in the morning - plenty of time left to sleep that night. And while Tonks spent the rest of the night sleeping peacefully and being held for the first time in months, Harry's own sleep was once more plagued with strange visions.

He was in the landscape he recognized as his magical core's. Things continued to distort further and further. But Harry felt like something was wrong. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, though. He had spent a lot of time walking around the landscape after his venture to the Ministry the previous year at Hogwarts. Things seemed generally the same as they had then, but there was still something that was distinctly wrong.

Harry slid his hands into his pockets as he walked towards the murky waters of the lake. Glancing up at the overcast sky, he called, "Is something going on in here?"

The fused voice of his core didn't answer. Shrugging it off, Harry sat down by the water's edge and gazed at the dark liquid. The lake looked as though someone had come along and dumped a large portion of mud into it, the once pristine waters now a sickly brown. Stranger still, the water was rippling, as though something had disturbed its surface.

Then he saw it, out in the dead center of the lake. A head was looking back at him. It was covered in a thick layer of lake-gunk, but it was clearly a head. The eyes were a piercing green, brighter than his own, and were the only things really visible through the muck. There were no whites to the eyes - they were literally a solid green.

Harry stood up, eyes narrowing as he stared at the thing in the water. There had never been anyone else here. Not really. But now his core wasn't responding and something was lurking in his lake.

Harry took a step back and the thing advanced, seemingly the same distance. Harry halted before taking a second, more cautious step back. And again, at the same speed, the thing moved forward an equal distance.

"Who are you?!" Harry called.

He got no response, but a visible, unnaturally long grin split the lower part of the thing's face. The mouth was visible beyond the white teeth, which looked like an ordinary human's would, and was the same green color as the creature's eyes.

Harry tilted his head and, instead of moving backwards, took a step forward. The thing in the lake moved back a pace.

"...Interesting." Harry murmured. "What the devil are you?"

Harry sat down in his original position and stared out and into the creature's eyes. Neither moved for what seemed like hours. But Harry could feel the tug of wakefulness starting to hit him, so he once more stood.

"Time to wake up!" He called. He turned and began walking off. He didn't get too far before a distorted voice, as unnatural as the creature's eyes, called back to him.

"When do I get to come out and play again?!"

Harry stopped and turned around, only to find himself standing mere inches away from the creature. It was seemingly made of light itself,



being an almost blinding white color, save for the eyes and mouth, which was still peeled back into a grin.

"...What are you?" Harry asked, his voice unable to come out at anything but a whisper.

"You." Whispered back the voice, the grin growing larger.

"...Explain." Harry said.

"Don't pretend." Said the creature, amusement evident in its solid green eyes. "You know what I am. You called on me. We killed her. Surely you noticed."

"We killed her? Who?"

"Lestrage." Hissed the voice. "You needed power. You wanted to *kill*!" Its voice then lowered even further, its mouth returning to a normal size. "Just as you needed me when those Death Eaters attacked."

"I'm not sure I understand. But if you're some kind of sleep-addled representation of my anger and depression, then I must not have raised all of my Occlumency barriers properly before I drifted off." Harry said.

"Oh, they're working." Said the thing, its grin returning.

"Then you shouldn't be here." Harry stated.

"Shouldn't. Am, though." Said the creature. "And I won't be leaving until you accept the fact that you need me. That you enjoyed killing them. That you desire to slay again. You can't get rid of me because I'm you and you're me. If you had to represent me as anything..."

"...Yes?"

"I would be your wild magic." Said the creature, its hollow-sounding voice dissolving into insane laughter.

"I see." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "Maybe I should try shutting *that* part of myself down sometime."

"Won't let you." Said the creature, looking as serious as a thing with no features could.

"And how do you intend to stop me?" Harry asked. "I'm the one in charge."

"Except when you're not." Said the creature.

"I'm going to try and keep *those* moments to a minimum." Harry growled. "I don't like being that way."

"But it's so much fun!" Cooed the thing, raising a hand and gesturing. "To cleave away at the darkness and fill them with our light... that's what we were born to do! It's what we *love* to do! Five fewer Death Eaters in the world now, all because of us. Well, Terry got the one, but the other four were all us! They took our family and they had to be slain because of it. And Terry... stupid kid. Never knew when to bow down and take it. And look what we did to him."

"Shut up." Harry hissed.

"Oh? Don't want to hear it? It was glorious, though!" The creature cried, arms stretched fully out to the sides. "He screamed so horribly as we took his legs from him! The force of the spell damn near split them both in half! Now I'll admit to being a little overzealous - I didn't manage to get his arm all the way off with that Bolt. But it was the first breath of fresh air you let me have in *MONTHS!* I was *RUSTY!*"

"I remember being in full control. Maybe you're just a manifestation of my uncertainty." Harry said, staring coldly at the being of light.

"I guided your hand. Do you think you could have done half the things you did to Lestrage without me? Everyone saw it. The burst of light. Your eyes turn. Oh, it was only for a split second, but if you ask those that were there, they would own up." Purred the creature. "That was me. You need me. And until the day you accept the fact that you can enjoy killing the living, we'll be separate entities. And I'll be able to take control whenever you let your guard down."

"Is that a threat?" Asked Harry.

"A threat? Never." Said the creature. "Merely pointing out what will happen."

"And if I reforge the Gauntlet?"

"You would effectively chain me to the ground. You would become my jailer, only releasing me when the mood struck you." Said the creature. "I can only hope you be a man and admit your own feelings before then. As I promise you this: I won't go down without a fight."

"Tooth and claw to the very end?"

"If necessary."

The two stared at one another for awhile longer before the creature turned and walked back to the lake, slipping under the water as it went. "Go. Wake up. Just remember what we talked about today. I'll let the other guy back in here now. This place doesn't suit my style at all. Too cold. Too isolated. Why couldn't you have envisioned a tropical island, anyway! Wouldn't say no to some women to talk to. Bloody *prude*."

Harry jerked awake for the second time that night, found himself tangled in an empty blanket and, in the panicked daze he was in, fell off the bed. It was a harsh way to wake up, but it wasn't the first time he had awakened to such a situation. And, he thought as he sat up and tugged himself free from the blanket, it probably wouldn't be the last.

He needed... coffee. Very, very strong coffee.

And aspirin. A lot of aspirin. His head was killing him.

*"Always an interesting show."* Commented Boris. *"Do I even want to know?"*

"Shut up. And probably not." Harry said, extending his arm to the miniature taipan, who slid up and around his arm. "Let's go get some food. You hungry yet?"

*"I wouldn't say no to some raw meat of some sort. If they had it. Not bothering to change out of your pajamas?"*

"Nah. It'll let them know I'm feeling better. More relaxed." Harry said, walking over to the door and opening it. "Surprised Nymmy's awake already."

*"It's almost noon."* Said Boris.

"Well, there's your problem then." Harry muttered.

The Tonks women were in the kitchen, just sitting down to a small lunch. Andromeda smiled over at Harry as he entered. "Good morning, Harry. How did you sleep?"

"Hideously!" Harry replied with a grin, walking over and sitting next to Tonks, who smiled at him. "Got any coffee or aspirin? I feel like *hell*."

"You look it." Tonks said, prodding Harry's side. "We heard the thump - did you fall out of bed *again*?"

"Yes. Shut up." Harry said, giving the girl the evil eye.

"Aye aye, King Raven." Tonks said, giggling as Harry glared at her.

"Gonna kill those two." Harry muttered darkly as he crossed his arms.

"I think it's cute!" Tonks said.

"You *would*." Harry mumbled. "So, what's for lunch?"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

A few days later, Dumbledore popped out of the fireplace.

Harry was sitting in a chair, lost in one of the books from Sirius' house. Tonks was sitting on the couch, working on a Charms essay. Andromeda was at work and, most likely, would be there well into the night. Ever since Fudge had vanished, she had been putting in more hours to help out the other Departments when needed. It was tiring work, but the overtime pay was good.

Both Ravenclaws looked up when the headmaster straightened up and dusted the soot from himself.

"This is unexpected." Harry said. "Did something happen?"

"Not as such, no." Dumbledore said. After drawing his wand and cleaning up the rest of the mess the Floo had caused, he sat down in a chair across from Harry's. "However, there are a few things that need to be discussed."

"Such as?" Harry asked.

"I would like to know if you have had any further visions of Voldemort or Azkaban." Stated Dumbledore, leaning forward slightly.

"Not any more than usual." Harry said, bookmarking his spot and setting his evening reading aside. "I assume you're asking because the Order hasn't found anything out?"

"More or less." Said Dumbledore. "While our efforts have been constant, we still have no idea what he is planning or where he is located."

"Snape's not being let in on any information?" Tonks asked.

"Not at the moment, no." Said Dumbledore. "Which leads me to believe that, whatever Voldemort may be up to, he is not ready to unleash the floating Azkaban on us just yet."

"So you hoped I'd had some information? Sorry, can't say as I do." Harry said. "Scar hasn't even hurt much. Whatever he's doing and wherever he is, he's keeping mighty quiet about it all."

"So it would seem." Dumbledore said, becoming quiet for a few minutes before looking up at Harry again. Harry was looking back with an almost apathetic expression on his face. He had been expecting something along those lines. Dumbledore knew the outburst at Number Four hadn't all been the anger and depression talking. "Perhaps there is something you wish to say to me?"

"Perhaps." Harry said. "You told me last year that you knew where the power gem was for the Gauntlet. Is it still there?"

"It is." Dumbledore said. "I assume you ask for a reason?"

"I need a regulator for my wild magic. Clearly, it's getting out of hand." Harry said. "The conduit gem would handle that. But without the on-switch for the thing, it wouldn't do any of us any good."

"And the Philosopher's Stone required?" Asked Dumbledore. "The tiny piece you have would not be enough to fulfill the requirements to reforge the device."

"Yeah, plus there's the 'small' complication of the conduit gem being in Azkaban. And we still don't know where *it* is." Harry said. "I know, I know. It's going to be nearly impossible to pull off. But I know I'd be able to stop Voldemort if we could reforge the Gauntlet. I just... have this feeling about it..."

"We also do not know of a method to reforge the Gauntlet." Dumbledore added. "I am not entirely sure this is the correct plan to use, Harry."

"A hundred wands." Harry said. "Balthazar told me as much himself."

"You plan to buy as many to use?"

"Nope. Got a better idea, but I dunno how gung-ho you'll be about it." Harry said, grinning crookedly.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows before asking, "And why might that be?"

"How's Ravenclaw's Staff doing?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore paused before smiling. "Quite well, thank you. I've kept it safe in my quarters since you came back from the Chamber of Secrets."

"The way I see it," Harry said, "If you can get the power gem and we can use the Staff to power the reforging process, we only have two obstacles."

"Two rather sizable obstacles." Tonks muttered. "How're you gonna get a *real* Philosopher's Stone? Flamel is dead, yeah?"

"Yes." Dumbledore said, nodding slowly. "He and his wife have both passed on. And, unfortunately, creating one of our own is almost certainly out of the question. I would not call it Dark magic. However..."

"A lot of lives are still required." Harry finished. "Yeah, I've been trying to think of a workaround for that, too..."

"Still not gonna matter unless we get the other gem from Azkaban." Tonks said.

"Yeah, I wish I had been able to work out where it was located sooner." Harry said, scowling. "If I could have gotten it before Voldemort returned to the island and *stole* it, we might be able to get rid of him sooner than later."

"So. What do you plan to do?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Whatever it takes." Harry said, shrugging. "Do you think you could get ahold of the power gem for me?"

"I do not think it would be a difficult task if I called in a few favors." Dumbledore said. "In fact, there is a bit of important business I have to attend to at the Ministry tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh? And what might that be?" Asked Harry.

"It has not been publicly announced yet, so please try to keep it under wraps until it is. But a new Minister of Magic has been decided upon." Dumbledore said.

"Anyone we'd know?" Tonks asked.

"I don't believe so. His name is Rufus Scrimgeour. He's to officially take office on the first of August. In addition... he would like to meet you, Harry." Dumbledore said.

"...Yeah, alright." Harry said slowly. "I'll size him up. You know anything about him?"

"Not as much as I should. However, I know he is a trustworthy individual. Moreso than Cornelius could have ever hoped to be. He is decisive and I do believe that he will be able to weed out the moles within the Ministry. That is what he has been chosen to do, anyway. Whether or not he will succeed will become clear with time."

"One last question." Harry said. Dumbledore nodded, so he continued, "When do we get to head for Grimmauld Place?"

"Though I haven't spoken to Andromeda about it, I see no reason why you could not go tonight if you would like." Dumbledore said.

"I'd love to." Harry said. He looked down at the floor and continued in a quieter voice, "I need to go back. I need to just... sit in his room for awhile. Alone. It'll help. ...Though that reminds me..."

"Your relatives have been taken and buried in their family plot. Your Uncle's memory has been altered. He now believes he has always been alone. Would you like to go see them? Your Aunt and cousin?" Dumbledore asked.

"...I'll go next summer." Harry said. "I don't think I can deal with it right now. When all of this is over - when I've killed Voldemort - then I'll be able to face them again. I failed them both. I don't have the right to see them. Not yet."

"Very well." Dumbledore said. "Now then, I believe it is time for me to take my leave. I have much to do yet. I will speak to Andromeda later, but you two would do well to go pack up now just in case. In the event that your trip will indeed be tonight, I will come by and we will Floo in. The connection will not be active for long."

"Alright. See you tonight then. And uh... I'm sorry." Harry said.



"It is quite alright. Sometimes it is best to simply vent. Given the amount of stress you were under and the events that had unfolded, your actions were justified. Well then!" Dumbledore said, getting up and heading for the fireplace. Grabbing a bit of Floo Powder, he soon vanished into the flames.

"Grimmauld Place..." Harry sighed. "...I don't even want to think about it, yet it's all I've done. I need to go there. I need to walk around."

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At nine that night, Dumbledore reappeared. He found Harry and Tonks doing the same things they had been earlier in the day. The only indication that they had moved at all was that their trunks (and Hedwig's cage) were sitting nearby.

"Ready to go, are you?" Asked Dumbledore with a smile.

"For hours." Harry said, closing his book again.

"Have you talked to mum at all?" Asked Tonks.

"Indeed I have. She knows of the plan and will be by before the end of the night." Said Dumbledore. "And Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Dumbledore reached into his robes and pulled out a small, round gemstone. It was an almost unnatural shade of green. Harry stared at it for a minute before getting up and walking over. Dumbledore held the gem out and Harry took it, aiming it towards a lamp to get a better look.

"The Eye of Caspar." Dumbledore said, his voice soft. "The on-switch for the Gauntlet of the Magi."

"Another piece of the puzzle." Harry murmured. "One step closer. Three of five." He paused, closing his eyes. "The conduit gem and the Philosopher's Stone. I'll think of a way to create the Stone later. Balthazar's gem is more important. We *have* to find Azkaban before Voldemort pumps enough power through it to raise the place."

"A challenge for another day." Dumbledore said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Put the Eye in your trunk and we shall leave for Number Twelve. The window for travel will not be open for much longer."

"Yeah..." Harry said, snapping out of the daze he had fallen into. He turned and headed for his trunk, opening it up and stuffing the Eye of Caspar at the bottom, next to the shard of the Philosopher's Stone and the ruined Gauntlet. "Yeah, let's go..."

Dumbledore offered to carry the supplies for the two, as neither of the Ravensclaws were much good at Floo travel. Harry knew it was just an excuse so the headmaster wouldn't have to outward say 'I'm doing this so you don't crash land on your owl.'

"I hate magical travel." Harry muttered before being swallowed by the green flames. He clamped his eyes shut, saving himself from the dizzying sights that passed him by. And, all too soon, he found himself colliding with the painfully solid floor.

He quickly rolled to one side just as Tonks came through, stumbling slightly but keeping herself upright. Dumbledore came through last, holding Hedwig's cage. He had shrunk the two trunks down before leaving. Naturally, he landed as gracefully as one could coming out of a fireplace. He quickly took the trunks from his robes and enlarged them again.

"And here we are." Said Dumbledore, setting Hedwig's cage down and drawing his wand to banish the soot from himself. Turning his wand on the Ravensclaws and repeating the process, he asked, "I take it you will be able to take your trunks from here?"

"Yeah, we'll be fine. Knee's gonna hurt for awhile, though." Harry muttered, standing up and rubbing at his leg. "Got somewhere you need to be?"

"A meeting has already started." Dumbledore said, already moving across the room. "Which is why, I believe, no one is here to greet us. If you'll both excuse me..."

Harry grabbed his trunk in one hand, Hedwig's cage in the other. "I'm gonna go take my things up."

"Harry?"

"Hm?"

"What are we gonna do?"

Harry looked over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"They're here too, aren't they? Draco and... her..." Tonks said.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess so..." Harry said, glancing off. "...I dunno. It depends. Do you wanna own up to Leon's powers being out of control?"

"I do *now*." Tonks said. "I've felt weird all summer... I think you might be right."

Harry smiled. "Then I'll figure something out. Just... give me awhile, alright? I dunno how well Pansy will react..."

"I really should thank her for taking care of you." Tonks said, grinning slightly. "Think she'd wanna share?"

"Oh lord. No. I couldn't deal with both of you at once. You're both handfuls by yourselves. ...Why do I have the feeling that you two are gonna drive my crazy this summer?" Harry wondered aloud, shaking his head as he tugged his things out of the room.

He didn't run across anyone on the way up to his password-protected door, though he heard people talking in the rooms he passed. There would be plenty of time to talk to everyone. Tomorrow, he felt, was going to be a long day. He whispered the password in Parseltongue and slipped into his bedroom. There was a thick layer of dust covering everything. He frowned, but paid it little attention. He'd let Mrs. Weasley make the rounds tomorrow. It would probably make the insane woman happy.

Setting Hedwig's cage near the bathroom door, Harry dragged his trunk to the foot of the bed. After shaking the blanket to rid it of dust, he fell backwards onto the bed, staring up. The house felt... empty, almost. It wasn't as bad as Harry had imagined, but it wasn't nice, either. It just felt as though something was missing. Which, Harry thought as he closed his eyes, it was.

"I'm home, Sirius..."

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Author's Notes: Interesting how some didn't notice the warning before chapter 2 stating, out there in the open as it was, that I would be discussing Deathly Hallows at the end of the chapter. And yet some still felt the need to flame me. It isn't my fault you can't read.

So, as you can see, a few more twists here. The creature in the lake will play a very important role towards the end(?) of book 6. As of right now, I only have to chapter 5 planned out. I still need to gather my notes and think about what needs to be in book 6 and what needs to be moved to book 7.

I've had the event I speak of planned since Chamber. And I cannot wait to write it. Once I hit the second half of this book, things will inevitably pick up again. As I've stated in the past, though, I just have a hard time doing these early chapters where nothing's really going on.

No, there will not be Harry x Tonks x Pansy. As cute as I'm sure it would be, those types of fics drive me insane. I just felt like throwing a reference in to drive the threesome shippers crazy. Anyway, sorry for taking so long and, most likely, sorry for taking so long with 4, as I'm gonna jot up a book guide now. Until next time, kids.

## Chapter 4 – Saying Goodbye

Harry sighed as he rolled onto his side. He hated sleeping by himself. But he needed a night to think about what he was going to do. He had some semblance of an idea now, but it was still going to be hard. He just hoped Pansy would understand. It was rather abrupt of him to tell her, after all.

He had only gotten a few hours of sleep. Thankfully, Voldemort wasn't able to get to him that night. Unfortunately, he had still jerked awake every few hours. Eventually, he stopped letting himself drift off, choosing instead to stay awake and think about how he would plan the rest of his summer.

Obviously, there would be a trip to some place or another to meet Rufus Scrimgeour. He was only slightly nervous about that. Obviously, he wanted to make a good impression on the new Minister, but at the same time, he wanted to show that he would stand true to his own beliefs. If the Minister was serious about weeding out Death Eaters in the Ministry and if he was serious about standing up to Voldemort, they would have no trouble.

Then there was just getting used to where he was. Maybe he would seek out Pansy first, though. If he was going to spend the day grieving, he might as well be in the right mood, after all. Maybe it was for the best that he had been given Sirius' old bedroom to sleep in. With the door password protected like it was, no one but him could enter. He could just stay locked up for as long as he felt it necessary.

He needed to talk to Lupin, though. Surely, Sirius had a will written. After everything that he had been through, it would be foolish not to. If nothing else, Harry figured that Lupin would have made Sirius write one. And, in turn, Sirius would have made Lupin write one, too. He would ask next time he saw Lupin in good condition.

Rolling onto back, Harry stretched out and opened his eyes, letting out another sigh. "I'm glad I'm here, but..."

*"Too many memories hitting you."* Boris said. *"Too difficult to keep them out and function."*

"Exactly. It's just... why? You know? Why was he taken from me? Why the hell didn't anyone stop Bellatrix before she killed him? Even if I wasn't... feeling like myself... at the time, what I said to Dumbledore held water - if he had only done something..." Harry said, frowning. "I refuse to believe he was incapable of it."

*"Perhaps you give him too much credit. I doubt he is as detached from war as everyone seems to believe. He has known and cared for many people over the years, has he not? It cannot be easy for him to handle their deaths, either."* Boris murmured. *"He, like you and Lupin, was probably too afraid to move. No matter what he may say otherwise."*

"Maybe." Harry said.

*"People seem to forget, he's human, too. Stronger with magic than most, certainly, but magic alone won't keep you from halting in your tracks if someone you care about is in danger."* Boris said.

"I would have tried something - anything - if I were in his position." Harry said, eyes closing again. "Anyway, it's useless talking about this. It's in the past. If I had really wanted to change it that badly, I would have gotten a time turner somehow. It would have been really dangerous and really difficult, but I could have done something. But messing with time is tricky, to say the least."

*"So what do you plan to do?"* Asked the taipan.

"Probably go downstairs and eat. I'm sure Mrs. Weasley is already up. Once Pansy wakes up, I'll pull her aside somewhere and talk to her. I hope she doesn't take it too hard."

*"She's a girl, Harry. She's going to be upset."* Boris pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. I just hope she doesn't hate me. I still want to be friends. I still want to keep her close. She did me the biggest favor anyone ever has, knowing it would end someday. I feel like complete shite for doing this..."

*"She seemed to want you to be happy. As long as you are, I don't think there will be any problems."* Boris hissed.

"I hope you're right." Harry said. With a groan, he pushed himself into a sitting position. "Coming down with me?"

*"I think I'll wait."* Boris said. *"Good luck."*

"I'll need it." Harry muttered, going to his trunk and grabbing some clean clothes. Once dressed, he slumped his way out of his room and headed downstairs, pausing long enough to look at the wall where Mrs. Black's painting once hung. He smirked faintly and continued on to the kitchen.

Opening the door, he looked up to find not only Mrs. Weasley in the room, but also Malfoy and Pansy. The Slytherins were nursing what had to be really strong coffee, judging by the smell.

"Ah, Harry, dear. Good morning, did you sleep well?" Mrs. Weasley asked, smiling over at him as she worked on making some biscuits.

"Like a rock." Harry lied, walking over to the table and sitting opposite his friends. Both of them looked as though they had slept as well as he had. "Rough night?"

"You could say that." Malfoy muttered, glancing to the side briefly. Lowering his voice, he added, "She's insisted on waking us up early. Says we seem too *thin*. Mother and her have been at odds the entire time we've been here."

"If it gets too bad, just do what I did. Ask to get a password protected door. Mine's got the extra convenience of being in Parseltongue." Harry said.

"It isn't to say the food's bad." Pansy said, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. "Just that we don't want to get up this bloody early to *eat* it."

"Yeah. She'll drive you crazy. Probably should have warned you." Harry said.

"There'll be plenty of time to tell you what else has been happening to us." Malfoy said, his voice coming back up. "What happened to *you*? No one's wanted to fill any of us in on the details."

"Probably for the best." Harry said. "You don't want to know. I don't want to remember. The short version is that my aunt and cousin are dead and by the time Dumbledore and the Order got there, I'd taken care of the Death Eaters."

"They did let slip you attacked your uncle. What happened?" Asked Pansy.

"Basically, my aunt got fed up with him blaming me over Dudley - my cousin - losing his soul. She threw a frying pan full of bacon at him. He got mad and charged at her. I did what I had to to keep her safe. She changed. Right before the end, she changed. I was planning to keep her and Dudley protected and happy the rest of their lives. I have the money for it." Harry muttered, looking down at the table.

"I'm amazed you got away with it." Malfoy said, taking a quick sip of coffee. "Anyone else and disorder or no, the Ministry would have jumped on them."

"Maybe Scrimgeour was pulling strings." Harry said.

"Yeah, we've heard the Order whispering around about him." Pansy said. "Think he'll be more competent than Fudge?"

"A wood louse would be more competent than he was." Harry said. "Dumbledore said he wants to meet me. After he officially takes the helm, I'd imagine."

"Ah, the joys of being a celebrity." Malfoy deadpanned, earning him a weak glare. "Best of luck with it, Potter."

"Yeah, it's sure to be wonderful." Harry muttered darkly. He started to ask where they had gotten their coffee when the door opened and a half-asleep Remus Lupin wobbled in.

"Ah, Harry. Good morning!" He said, smiling as he flopped down in the seat next to Harry's. "I'd heard you got in last night."

"Morning, Moony. You look like hell." Harry said, eyebrow raising.



"Oh, just the usual lack of sleep following the full moon. Actually in rather high spirits!" Lupin said, turning to look at the Slytherins' coffee for a moment before continuing, "I... have a date!"

Malfoy snorted, earning him a slug on the arm by Pansy. Harry just grinned. "Oh? With *who*?"

"Not telling." Lupin said, a grin of his own forming.

"You're a mean one, Mr. Lupin." Harry said. "You realize I'll figure it out, right? Sooner or later. You can't hide anything from me."

"Oh, I fully intend you to figure it out. I look forward to the expression on your face when you do!" Lupin said.

"Ohh? So it's going to be something of a surprise? Hmm... who could it be?" Harry pondered, gazing off into nothingness as he thought.

"Where's Tonks?" Lupin asked.

"Hm? Probably asleep." Harry said, not really paying attention.

"How are you two doing?" Pansy asked, her voice quiet.

Harry looked over at her. "...Better." He said. Glancing briefly at Mrs. Weasley, he asked, "Want to go somewhere else and talk?"

Pansy nodded and set her coffee down. Harry followed, murmuring a 'keep her busy for us' to Lupin as he trailed Pansy out of the room. Lupin made a face as he exchanged a look with Malfoy.

Heading towards the library, Harry leaned back against the door. "I'm sorry." He began.

"Don't be." Pansy said, facing away from him. "I knew it couldn't last. What happened?"

"Without Leon around, she snapped out of it and realized what I'd been saying was true." Harry said. "I wish this could be easier... for all of us. I'm sorry, Pansy."

"Stop apologizing." Pansy mumbled. "So... I guess that means you and me are through, huh?"

Walking over, Harry wrapped his arms around Pansy and pulled her back into him. "I guess. I didn't plan for this, Pansy. It just sort of happened. A part of me wishes it could have happened in a better way. Something not so jarring."

"It's fine." Pansy said, letting out a quiet sigh. "I knew all along I was just a placeholder. It was my choice. So stop apologizing. Was hoping it would have lasted longer, sure, but... she makes you happy."

"Are you going to be alright?" Harry asked.

Pansy nodded slightly. "I had a feeling this was coming, really. Women's intuition or whatever. Give me a day to cry myself out and be depressed about it and I'll be alright again. I've been steeling myself for how to react ever since you kissed me that first time. It helped, but... yeah, it still hurts."

"That's life, huh? A lot of pain and sadness." Harry murmured, closing his eyes.

"Are *you* okay?" Pansy asked, looking over her shoulder.

"I'll probably be worried about you for awhile. Probably going to apologize a few dozen times. Probably sit around and sulk for a bit and wonder how I keep screwing up peoples' lives so much. It's what I do." Harry said.

"Wasn't referring to us." Pansy said, turning and looking up at Harry. "Have you... y'know, had time to mourn? Sounded like you and most of your family started to get along before the Death Eaters ruined things..."

"I don't have time to mourn." Harry said, shaking his head. "Voldemort's still out there and we still don't know where Azkaban is. When I take him down and feel like I can face the dead, *then* I'll mourn."

"It isn't good bottling things up." Pansy said, putting a hand on his chest. "You should take a break and just lay around being miserable and crying. It does wonders."

"I'm not the crying type." Harry said, smiling slightly. "I'll lock things up until I feel I can deal with them properly. I'll get by just fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Not in the least."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Idiot."

Harry closed his eyes as Pansy leaned in and hugged him back a moment later. "If she ever hurts you again, I'll kill her."

Harry chuckled. "I have no doubt that you would. Come on. Wanna go back to the kitchen? I think I heard more people moving around. You good?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay. You aren't the only one good at masking their emotions. With Death Eaters for parents, you kind of learn how to do that early on. I'll get through breakfast and excuse myself for awhile. Probably be down for dinner." Pansy said.

"And if you aren't feeling better by then, we can always duct tape Mrs. Weasley to the ceiling." Harry said, putting an arm around Pansy's shoulders as they headed for the door.

Pansy snorted. "Do what?"

Harry launched into a story about how Mrs. Weasley had burst in on he and Tonks sleeping together. How he had just about used any force necessary to force her out of their room and how he and Sirius had conspired to duct tape her to the ceiling if she kept acting like she ran the place. By the time they re-entered the kitchen, both of them were laughing.

"What's so funny?" Asked Lupin.

"Nothing, nothing." Harry said, walking back to his spot and poking the current occupant. "Oi. That's my place, woman. Move it!"

Tonks stuck her tongue out at him. "I didn't see your name on it. Tote your lazy butt one space over!"

"If I must." Harry said, taking one large step to the right and pulling out the chair. In addition to Tonks, a good number of Weasleys were now lingering around the table. Ginny looked like she wanted to be back in bed. Her hair was a mess. On either side of her sat one of her twin brothers, who seemed to be seeing how close they could push her before she went nuts and hexed their bits off.

Tonks glanced across the table at Pansy, who just smiled and nodded. Tonks mouthed a silent apology before looking down at the toast on her plate.

Breakfast passed with a surprise amount of silence. More people came and others left as the hour progressed. Lupin, who kept glancing at his watch throughout, finally got up and excused himself, saying he had some business to attend to. He looked decidedly irritated. Harry watched him leave, making a mental note to ask him what was up whenever he saw the man next.

When breakfast ended, Harry was the first to leave the table. Malfoy watched him for a moment before excusing himself and following. He trailed Harry to the library, which still had a surprising amount of books left in it. Harry figured Mrs. Weasley would have purged the place clean by now.

"How'd things go?" Malfoy asked, closing the door behind him as he entered.

"She said she'll probably spend a day crying. I'll probably feel like shit for a few months, if not longer." Harry said, walking to the back of the room and scanning the shelves. "I didn't plan to get back together with Nymmy so soon."

"Clearly. Do try and watch what you do around Pansy for awhile though. Slytherin is filled with skilled liars. Pansy's excellent at it.

Knuts to Galleons she's more depressed than she's ever been." Malfoy said.

"Rub a little more salt in the wound, Draco, would you kindly? I don't feel bad enough as it is." Harry said, resting his arm against some books and leaning forward. "Weren't you all for Pansy and I getting together?"

"I was also all for you leaving the girl and the vampire in your wake." Malfoy said, shrugging as he sat in a chair. "You can't expect to make everyone happy. Pansy provided when Tonks refused to."

"And that meant everything to me." Harry said, closing his eyes. "It saved me. ...Or rather, it chained me up."

"Meaning?"

"Not sure right now. Been having weird dreams." Harry said, turning to lean back against the shelf. "I've all but decided to lock my emotions away entirely if I can. I need to think clearly this year. Azkaban's out there somewhere. If it can fly, Voldemort can drop Dementors on us any bloody time he sees fit."

"A pleasant thought, to be sure. So, what's the battle plan?" Malfoy asked, glancing over.

"There is none. I'm hoping Tom is feeling happy so I can see what the devil he's up to. Bit of a double-edged blade there, though. Contact with Balthazar is random and has been getting so sporadic that I doubt he can project anymore. I need the gem he's stuck in to complete the Gauntlet. The Gauntlet is the key to victory."

"But until you figure out where Azkaban is and how to lead a raid on the place, you can't go and collect the missing piece." Malfoy finished, nodding. "Yeah, bit of bad luck there, Potter."

"Incredibly. Par for the course, though." Harry said, walking over and throwing himself down on the couch. "...This is completely weird, you know."

"Which part?"

"Us. Sitting here talking like old friends. As much bravado as I threw out last year, I'm glad it paid off."

"Regrets?"

"Far from it. I'd say the two of us could clean the clocks of anyone else at Hogwarts, staff not included." Harry said, smirking.

"Now there's a fun thought. A complete rampage through the school." Malfoy said, dryly. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a baffling train of thought?"

"Everyone's a little mad, Draco. Just to what extent. If I had told you I'd kill a former dorm-mate before the summer ended, what would you have said?" Harry asked.

"I'd say you didn't have the balls for it." Malfoy said. "So, that's what happened, huh? You realize you're going to get asked about it over and over."

"Yeah. I know. Let them ask. I wasn't myself at the time." Harry said, making a face.

"You know I'm going to ask for a better version. Who was it?" Malfoy asked.

"Terry. Terry Boot. Sent to live with his abusive father after his own idiocy got him expelled. He killed his old man and went after his mother next." Harry said.

"Let me guess - he blamed you for his misfortune?"

"Basically. I don't know what happened. I... back at the Ministry, something happened, Draco. I have no idea what. But something changed. It happened again the day I killed those Death Eaters. Didn't help that I had a really creepy dream that night. Or hell, it wasn't a dream exactly, but that's the best I can describe it without going into boring details." Harry said, scrunching his face up. "I think... seeing Sirius getting killed did something to me."

"Trauma will do that." Malfoy said, cocking an eyebrow. "So... what? You have a sadistic side to you now that only comes out when you're pissed off?"

"Yes. I think. I... saw this creature of white light in the dream. Green eyes and mouth. Odd, hollow voice." Harry said. He launched into an explanation of the experience he had had in his magical core. Malfoy had his brow creased by the time he finished.

"Interesting. Did you feel like you were out of control?" Malfoy asked.

"No... and that's what bothers me. That bastard Dolohov said I'd make a fine Death Eater. Given what I did to Terry, I'm starting to believe it..." Harry said.

"Don't start with that crap, Potter." Malfoy said, getting to his feet. "It doesn't matter who you kill so long as they're the designated 'bad guys,' does it? Look at it this way - if you merely injured them; if you failed to *kill* them... what would happen? They'd go out and kill more people. We have no damned prison to throw them into. Not that Azkaban was ever bloody secure or anything."

"So once the battle comes to us...?"

"I'll kill them and sort them out later." Malfoy said. "I'm sure father will be kind enough to show his face. He has a thing for showing off. When the time comes, I'll be the one to strike him down."

"I'm sure he'll be gunning for you. How's your mother, by the way? I never did ask." Harry said.

Heading towards the back of the room and absent-mindedly looking at books as he went, Malfoy replied, "Surprisingly alright. I think being away from father has helped tremendously. I think she still has nightmares about him, though. Hopefully those will go away when I kill him."

"You never know." Harry said. "Sometimes nightmares can be fueled by the strangest things."

"Perhaps. But I know I'll sleep better once he's dead. Speaking of sleeping, Potter, what do you plan to do? Continue sleeping by yourself, or what?"

"I dunno. I may give it another day or two before letting Tonks back in. I have to give myself a bit of time to think. I need to convince myself that Pansy'll be alright. As much as she may try to say otherwise, I know she just got her heart broken. Having Tonks curled up with me will only amplify that knowledge."

"Pansy's a tough one, Potter." Malfoy said, grabbing a book at random and flipping it open. "Best to get it out of the way now and advance forward. The longer you wait, the more likely she'll be to try getting back in your arms. If she sees you hesitating, she won't think twice."

"Sometimes, Draco, I wish I was a drinking man." Harry said, shaking his head. "Because a situation like this calls for it, I feel."

"I'm afraid that unless you'd like some wine, I won't be able to help in that regard." Said Malfoy, walking back over. "Mother has had Severus running her errands."

Harry snorted. "*What?*"

Smirking, Malfoy continued, "He made the mistake of approaching her after a meeting. We're not exactly allowed to leave this place. And while I can understand why, it's still rather frustrating. Cabin fever and whatnot. So Severus comes over to talk and mother launches into a tirade about this house not having 'the basics' - she isn't used to *not* living extravagantly, after all. So Snape was sent to fetch a few things."

"I'm terribly depressed that I wasn't here when that happened." Harry said. "Snape and I may not outright hate each other anymore, but we're still not on the best of terms. I'm not above laughing at something like that."

"I was meaning to ask - what were you and Pansy laughing about when you came back?" Malfoy asked.



"Oh, just figuring out how to duct tape Mrs. Weasley to the ceiling if she didn't stop acting like this was her house." Harry said, grinning.

"Excuse me?"

"Well," Harry began, once more telling the story of how he and Sirius planned to stick the Weasley woman to the ceiling.

When he finished, Malfoy was nodding slowly and looked to be deep in thought. "Sounds rather reasonable. One question, though."

"Yes?"

"What the devil is 'duct tape'?"

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True to her word, Pansy vanished until dinner. Her eyes didn't look red nor puffy, but Harry knew she had probably spent awhile making herself look presentable. For his part, Harry kept his head down and his mouth shut. He had mostly been lost in his thoughts that day, and the other people in the house had ended up leaving him to his own devices. The twins had spent the most time before giving up.

After dinner was over, Harry pulled Tonks aside and asked her if it was alright if they waited awhile longer before moving back into the same room. She nodded, saying it would probably be best for Pansy if they didn't hop right back into their old routines. Harry smiled at her and gave her a kiss on the cheek before heading up to his room. After hissing the password to enter, Harry let out a long sigh.

"*Tough day?*" Asked Boris.

"Amazingly." Harry replied, kneeling in front of his trunk and opening it up.

"*What are you looking for?*" Boris asked, lifting his head as Harry rummaged around.

"This." Harry said, bringing out the Eye of Caspar moments later.

*"And what might you be planning to do?"*

"Just gonna look at it." Harry said, moving to sit on the edge of his bed. "Didn't get much of a chance before we came here."

*"I see. So this is another piece of the puzzle, is it?"*

"Aye. We'll see how long it takes to complete."

*"And therein lies the problem." Boris murmured. "Have you thought about what you plan to do in regards to finding or making a new Philosopher's Stone?"*

"No. That'll be the last thing we do. Kinda stress-inducing to think that reclaiming Balthazar's gem is going to be the easier of the two tasks..." Harry said, running his thumb over the gem's smooth surface. It glistened faintly in the dim light of the room.

*"If anyone can accomplish it, I'm sure it's you." Boris said. "I noticed you returned alone."*

"Yeah. Pansy looked alright at dinner, but she didn't talk at all. I couldn't even bring myself to make eye contact with her. I may not show it, but I feel awful." Harry said, laying back and holding the Eye up. "Talked to Nym after dinner. Asked if she would mind if we waited to resume 'normal operations,' so to speak."

*"Are you sure that's the best course of action to take?"* Asked Boris.

"Not in the slightest. But it'll help let me get my own head on straight. If she's still hurting, I'll work out something then. ...Boris?"

"Yes?"

"What do you think's happening to me?"

*"In regards to?"*

"What I've done." Harry said, looking over. "To Lestrage. To those Death Eaters. ...To Terry."

*"I cannot say. I will say this, however... your scent drastically changed the moment you let your Occlumency barriers down when you fought Terry Boot." Boris hissed softly. "I'm not talking a slight variation. I'm talking a complete change. One end of the spectrum to the other. I... am afraid I have no idea what that means."*

"Probably means I'm completely off my nut." Harry said, stretching his arms out over his head, the Eye still held tightly in one. "The sooner I get the Gauntlet on, the better. That thing I saw in my magical core, it said that forging the Gauntlet would effectively change it up."

*"And you wish to make that happen as quickly as possible, just in case?"*

"Yeah."

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At some point during the night, there was a knock on the door. Or, at least, Harry thought there was. He was awakened by something that had sounded like a knock, anyway. Getting out of bed and sliding on a shirt, he wobbled his way over and cracked it open. Remus Lupin stood on the other side, looking even more worn out than normal.

"I did wake you. I'm sorry." Lupin murmured.

"S'okay. What's up, Moony?" Harry asked, opening the door and allowing the older man in.

"Just some things we really should talk about." Lupin said. "Couldn't sleep, figured you couldn't either. Looks like I guessed wrong."

"I've been up far longer than I'd admit. Only just got to sleep." Harry said, closing the door and walking back towards the bed.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Lupin leaned forward and fell silent for awhile. Harry sat on the opposite side, twisting to look at the werewolf. He was about to ask what Lupin had on his mind when he spoke up.

"Sirius..." He began, speaking slowly, "left a will. Due to his position, however, I've been having to jump through hoops at the Ministry in order to get it processed properly."

"Was that where you went earlier today?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I think I've almost got them in a corner. They can't hold back much longer - they haven't the damn footing to." Lupin said, sounding irritated. "I've been trying to get it dealt with ever since he died and it's taken this long to get this far. It doesn't help that I'm a werewolf, of course."

"Hopefully Scrimgeour will be more competent than Fudge was." Harry said.

"Hopefully." Lupin agreed.

"So what did his will say?" Harry asked, voice getting quiet.

Lupin blew out a low sigh. "Not much. As talkative as Sirius was, he never was one for writing. It was as short as a will ever could be. He left behind things in three ways. One bit for you, one for Andromeda and Nymphadora, and one for me... despite my telling him that I didn't need any of it. He never did listen."

"I'd imagine all of our bank accounts got boosts then, huh?"

"Considerable boosts. Sirius actually never spent much. He put most of his own money into parts for his motorcycle, which is now yours. No, Sirius preferred to spend his money on and with his friends. The Tonks women were obviously given Number Twelve. They received the least of the Black funds. I got the most. I didn't want his money."

Lupin's voice had become strained. Harry sighed. "'I'd trade it all just to have him back,' huh? I know the feeling. But I can't let myself grieve. Not until Voldemort's dead. I've slipped once on that already. I don't plan to again. I have to get better. When I've taken care of Voldemort..."

"Bottling things up will only make them worse." Lupin said. "Luckily for me, the full moon provides an outlet for me. Harry, if your anger can drive you to do what I saw on Privet Drive..."

"They killed my family. What was the correct response, Moony? To hit then with an Expelliarmus and hope for the best? Disarming Death Eaters won't accomplish anything. Wands don't create the power. Plenty of wizards are capable of wandless magic. I'm not going to disarm someone only to find myself getting shot down. I refuse to let myself be that weak." Harry said, staring across the room. "I'm not some little boy who thinks that one can defeat one's enemies by disarming and stunning them. It's foolish to think any kind of war can be won that way."

"I'm aware of your feelings on the subject. I'm also aware of your character, Harry. You're not the type to do something like what I saw in that house." Lupin said.

"Malfoy seems to think seeing Sirius getting killed... I dunno, gave me split personalities or something." Harry said, shrugging with one shoulder. "I'm in control, but..."

"Out of control at the same time?" Offered Lupin.

"Something like that." Harry said. He leaned back on his arms and told Lupin about the strange dream he had had.

When he finished, Lupin's brow was creased. "I've never heard of anything like that before."

"Yes, well, lots of strange, unique things seem to happen to me." Harry said, scowling. "I've learned to deal with them."

"I'll talk to Albus about it, if you'd like. Maybe he knows." Lupin said.

"Maybe. I just hope I can figure out what Voldemort's doing... we don't even know if the damned island is flying yet or not." Harry said. "The lack of information is driving me up the bloody wall."

"Nothing a good night of sleep won't help, I'm sure. I'm sorry, I've stayed a bit longer than I had planned and haven't said all that I came

to say. But that can wait. I'll pull you aside the moment I get Sirius' will straightened out, alright?" Lupin said, getting to his feet and heading for the door.

Getting up and walking with him, Harry nodded. "Yeah. Good luck with that."

"Albus is assisting. But given the state of the Ministry, it's been a long, hard road." Lupin said. "Well then, I'll leave you to your rest. Good night, Harry."

"Night." Harry said, opening the door and letting Lupin out. Closing the door behind the man, Harry leaned against it for a moment. "...Sirius' will, huh?"

*"You have a motorcycle now."* Boris stated.

"A flying one, apparently." Harry said, walking back over and tugging his shirt off again. "I dunno where Sirius expected me to keep it."

*"He seemed troubled."* Boris said, watching Harry crawl back into bed.

"Probably feeling the same way I do." Harry said. "Wouldn't surprise me if he had spent a lot of time alone, too."

*"Sometimes the silence of being by yourself can clear your head."*

"Mine needs to hurry up, then." Harry murmured, closing his eyes and pulling up the covers. "I could use a bit less clutter up there. Night, Boris."

*"Good night, Harry."* Boris said.

"Hopefully tomorrow will be a little better than today was, huh?"

*"Indeed."*

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Author's Notes: Well. This took awhile. Not my fault for once. My computer died, kids. It happened on August 16, completely at random, in the morning. After much delays and many plans being schemed, a

friend convinced me to send my old PC to him - that he could fix 'er up and see if he could salvage my hard drive. He said it didn't sound like it was the problem. As of right now, we aren't sure WHAT the hell happened to it. In any case, my old PC is safe in Illinois right now with its new owner. The hard drive is safe, as are its contents. I had two thirds of this chapter done when the computer died. Drag, huh?

He'll be burning off all the contents I want from my old PC and sending them back via DVD-R and such. So in a few weeks, I'll be back to full operating capacity! So this'll be the only chapter of Citadel until then. I just wanted to get it back and get it finished and uploaded. I'm sorry it took so long, but as you can see, I really had no control. Life's a bitch, huh?

I'm amazed that I have over 200 reviews in just three chapters, though. You lot keep that up and I'll smoke the old records! Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter, despite the general lack of any action. And before anyone gets uppity with me - because that was happening a lot back when I was initially writing this chapter - just wait and watch where I take things. I promise it's a fun ride. Just don't gripe too much until you see what's in store, alright?

I try not to make my notes long, since FFN has hissy fits about that kind of thing. But I needed to explain my situation before talking about the actual chapter. Also, I'm sorry if the chapter seems to jump around in its pacing. That'll happen when you get two-thirds done and have to wait over a month to continue.

For those who haven't seen it, I started another fic during the month-plus I was worried about my old PC and its contents. Legend Reborn has four chapters up and a fifth will probably come after this chapter here goes up. It takes place in the year 3050. Best of my knowledge, no one's ever done the type of Potter fic I've set up. The chapters are shorter than the R-Series' are, though. Anyway, give it a look if you have the time. I have a few big ideas for it, and if I ever friggin' finish the R-Series (it seems like I've been writing it for a decade) I'll go work on it full time.

Thanks for listening to my rambling, kids. And thank you for your patience. Once I restore the contents of my old hard drive, we'll be in

full operating capacity and Citadel will once more be worked on full time. Later!



## Chapter 5 – The Citadel Rises

Harry sighed as he walked the familiar, grassy path. The trees had snapped in half. And there, down by the edge of the murky lake, was the creature of light. It was sitting, leaning back on its arms, and staring at the water. Harry paused momentarily before walking towards it. It didn't sit well with him that the thing was still there. He had hoped it had all been some kind of nightmare.

"I see you're up and around." Harry said, coming to a stop behind the creature.

"I'm busy." It said, its voice sounding hoarse. "Go away."

"Busy? You're sitting there." Harry stated, looking down.

"I'm keeping Voldemort from getting in, you bloody twit. Now shut up and let me concentrate."

"...Wait, what? I don't want you to keep Voldemort out! ...And why are you doing that, anyway? My occlumency is more than strong enough to keep him out on its own!" Harry said, making a sour face.

"Yeah, because last year proved letting Voldemort in was a good idea, right?" The creature hissed. "And no. They aren't. The old bastard's never been this happy before. Wanna taste?"

Before Harry could answer, the creature allowed itself to flop back, arms spread to its sides. Harry started to say something, but an invisible force suddenly crashed into his chest, knocking all the wind he thought he owned out of his lungs. Staggered by the impact, Harry stumbled and fell down, hands clutching at the spot he had been hit.

And somewhere far away, he could hear laughter. Insane, disconnected laughter.

Just as suddenly as the force had hit, it had lifted. The creature was sitting up again, green eyes once more focused on the lake. It looked irritated. "Do you see? He's got the damned island airborne. He's been cackling for an hour, if not longer. Can't let you know this shit,

though. You'd wake up and run around like a chicken with it's head cut off! You're supposed to be Ravenclaw, right? So start acting like one! Think, idiot, before you act!"

Cursing under his breath as he got back to his feet, Harry spat some blood off to the side before replying, "The sooner people know, the more we can save."

The creature laughed then, its hollow-sounding voice echoing. "Save? *SAVE*?! He's got the former prison of Azkaban floating in the air! He's got a small horde of Altered Dementors at the ready! Just because they can't fly doesn't mean he can't deploy them! He's going to sweep over this country and do whatever he damn well pleases! There's not going to *be* any saving!"

"There has to be a way! And how do you know he's got Altered?" Harry asked.

"Saw 'em. You know how you can sometimes see through his eyes? That. I took the brunt of the attack, so feel happy, kid. Got any questions?"

"Did he say what his plans were?"

The creature smiled grimly. "You're going to try forcing yourself awake if I tell you, aren't you?"

"If I must." Harry answered.

A pause, then a sigh. "Fine. I'll wake you up if you want. If you do that again, neither of us are gonna be worth a damn if it comes to it. He's going to start attacking orphanages. He wants to rid the country - and probably the world - of them. Lingered memories of his childhood. He basically wants to send a message, kid. But who knows how his damn mind is wired. I've tried not to look into it too deeply. Best I can figure, he's got some kind of device in place to keep the floating island hidden. He talked about dropping Altered on the unsuspecting. There's something else there, too. But he's keeping it well locked up..."

"If he wanted to make a point, there are better places for it. He's doing this solely because he knows it'll drive me crazy. All those kids... what the hell is he thinking?! Why the hell doesn't he just come after Hogwarts?! I know he wants me dead!"

"Like I said, I don't try to think about it. It's his plan, not mine. And just between the two of us, I think he's a bit too insane for coherent thought!" The creature snapped.

"Wake me up. And stop protecting me from it. I can handle it on my own. I need to know this crap so I can relay the information!" Harry exclaimed. "Why are you protecting me, anyway?"

"Because your magical core's been unstable ever since I decided to let Boot have it. Surely you've noticed things look worse off this time. If you get screwed up somehow, I do too. And the last thing I need is to somehow die before I get to have more fun!"

"Always looking out for number one, huh? How touching. Wake me up."

"Your call, kid. Have fun with the headache."

Harry's world went dark. Next thing he knew, his eyes had snapped open and he was in bed. He went to hop out of bed, but was temporarily paralyzed by the sudden, intense headache that washed over him. His scar felt like it was throbbing, and though it hadn't split open, it felt as though it wanted to. Hissing out a string of swears in Parseltongue, Harry quickly told Boris what was happening as he got dressed.

Throwing open the door to his room, he stormed into the hall and, as he headed for the stairs, knocked on every door along the way. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he could hear one of the Weasley twins whine out a groggy "What is it?"

"Voldemort's raised Azkaban! Get the others. I'm heading to the kitchen!" Harry called.

Only a few people were loitering about the kitchen. Dumbledore was one of those people. He looked up when Harry entered.

"Snape gotten in?" Harry asked, pausing only briefly before stepping on into the room.

"No." Dumbledore said. Harry nodded as he took a seat, leaning against the table and rubbing at his scar.

"Voldemort's got the island in the air." Harry growled, closing his eyes. "Just had a vision about it. He's got a swarm of Altered Dementors. I dunno what the hell's going on with them. He's changed them somehow. He's going to go after orphanages. And he's found a way to keep the island hidden somehow. I wish I had better information, but this headache's got me completely out of focus."

"I was afraid of that." Dumbledore said. "Minerva, would you please go and collect the other professors, as well as the rest of our little inner circle? I need to remain here for when Severus arrives."

"Of course." Said McGonagall. Harry heard her chair scrape as she stood. He hadn't even noticed her. The headache was pulsing almost, as if it had a life of its own. Just then, he felt something poke into the spot just above his scar. A shiver ran down his spine as a wash of cold water seemed to flow over his head. When the feeling passed, the headache had diminished considerably. Opening his eyes, he found Dumbledore smiling at him.

"Better?"

"Much. Thanks. What was that?"

"An old remedy."

Harry sat up straight, continuing to rub at his scar out of reflex than anything else. "I wish I had been able to stay asleep longer... might've been able to learn more about those new Dementors..." He made sure to avoid the topic of talking with the creature of light. The last thing he needed was for everyone to think he had gone completely off his nut.

Harry wanted to wait until everyone was assembled before talking about things further. As more and more arrived in the room, Harry kept his eyes focused on the doorway. Some thirty minutes after he

himself had entered, the person he had been waiting for arrived, looking decidedly the worse for wear.

"Severus." Dumbledore said.

"Bit large for a meeting, isn't it?" Snape asked, walking slowly into the room, keeping one hand against a wall.

"We need to swap notes, Professor." Harry said. "Woke up from a lovely dream about what's happening. You wouldn't happen to know how large his Altered Dementor force is, do you? Or what's keeping the island hidden?"

Snape glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded slowly. Blowing out a sigh, Snape allowed himself to turn and lean against the wall properly. "We've more problems than merely his little pet project or the fact that the island can remain hidden, Potter."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Do you know of Philip Lemarchand?" Snape asked, affixing Harry with a cold look.

"Doesn't ring any bells..." Harry replied.

"He was a madman. An inventor. A necromancer. He dabbled in the dark things in this world. He created many dangerous devices in his lifetime. Devices that, if one spent the time, could do terrible things. Legends tell of puzzles boxes opening gateways to hell itself. And while the Dark Lord hasn't gone after anything quite such as that, he did want a few of Lemarchand's old toys." Snape explained, bringing a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose. "The Box of Black Hearts is in his possession. And earlier tonight, the teams he sent out to find the Key to open it returned."

"What is he planning to do once he opens the Box, Severus?" Dumbledore asked. Harry glanced aside at the old man briefly, noticing how vaguely tense the headmaster looked and sounded.

"He's already opened it. And he removed his blind spot." Snape said, sneering.

"His blind spo-- oh no..." Harry said, looking down at the table.

"Would one of you speak English so the rest of us could figure out what's going on?" Pansy asked, looking surly at the far end of the table.

"Voldemort has a flying island now." Harry said.

"Yes, and?" Pansy said.

Harry turned to look at the half-asleep Slytherin. "*AND* what would be the problem in that?!"

"...Oh. Oh no..." Said Hermione, hands up to her mouth. "The problem is that Dementors can't fly..."

"...Wait, hold on. You mean to tell me he's...?" Pansy started to ask.

"Exactly." Snape said. "He wouldn't allow any of us to witness him opening the Box. But when he returned, he had one of his little abominations with him. It had wings."

"Fantastic." Harry said, letting his head thump down on the table. "Someone remind me why we can't just bring some Muggles into this to drop a bloody bomb on the place. Or, I dunno, give us some firearms. Or grenades. I'd like to fire a rocket right up Voldemort's pasty,

grey--"

"It would be too risky. We won't involve Muggles in our affairs." Dumbledore said, cutting Harry off. "And bullets are hardly much of a threat to a wizard of Voldemort's caliber." Turning to Snape, he asked, "Do you know if he has any immediate plans, Severus?"

"No. All he told us is that we're to show up in two weeks' time to bear witness to his first great deed." Snape said. "He wants us there at noon."

"Do you think he's going to attack in broad daylight?" Dumbledore asked.

"He has no reason not to." Harry said, closing his eyes as he lifted his head. "He's got a hidden, floating island filled with murderers and Dementors. Dementors that can fly, no less."

"The good news, if there can be any to this, is that he's not figured out how to use whatever was in the Box on the 'regular' Dementors." Snape said. "He claimed to have tried, only to meet with 'catastrophic failure.'"

"Probably blew it up." Harry muttered. "Why do I have a feeling he's going to deploy his Altered over several orphanages in the middle of the day?"

"Probably because he will." Snape said. "He was smiling the entire time we were there. He let pass people speaking to him without being allowed. That's never happened before."

"Yeah, I felt. Heard, too. Good old fashioned nightmare fuel." Harry said. "...So. What's the plan?"

"There is no plan, Potter. It's going to take all of our time just to figure out the best way to deal with the Altered." Snape said.

"Using a Patronus on them wont work, then." Harry said.

Snape smiled grimly. "Exactly. Whatever he did to create them, he stripped away their one glaring weakness."

"This just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it? So how the hell do you stop them?" Asked Harry.

"He claims you can't. And without one of our own to test methods out on, that claim may very well be correct." Snape said.

As Snape finally pushed himself away from the wall, heading for an empty chair near the headmaster, Harry let out a low sigh. He closed his eyes and did everything he could to block out the talking that had started to break out throughout the room. His mind was working as fast as it could. If one couldn't stop one of the Altered with a Patronus, what did one use?

*'A Patronus is impure.'* Came an irritatingly familiar voice in his head.

*'Can I not even escape you when I'm awake now?'* Harry thought, mentally scowling.

*'You want to know what I mean. Don't try to hide it. I'm you, kid. I know these things too!'* Said the voice of the creature of light.

*'I know what you mean, damn it. The Patronus is impure because anything stronger would be ridiculously dangerous to try and conjure.'* Harry thought.

*'Exactly. There's a reason a Patronus is so hard to cast for most. Humans are intrinsically bitter and depressing. Most can't think of memories strong enough to use. We both know what kind of force you use in your own Patronus though, don't we?'*

Harry bit back his first response, choosing instead to agree with the creature.

*'You're too scared to try, aren't you?'* Asked the creature, his voice amused.

*'Try what?'* Harry thought.

*'You haven't worked it out yet, have you? Hah! But we're the same being! How could you not know?!'*

*'If you're going to tell me, tell me. Don't gloat.'*

*'Tsk. Very well. You want the Gauntlet to focus your wild magic - me - and keep it from getting out of control, correct? So you'll be strong enough to fight Tommy.'*

*'Correct.'*

*'And you know damn well that I won't go down without a fight, correct?'*

*'Correct.'*

*'You also know how strong we are when I'm in control. Correct?'*



*'I could channel every ounce of our wild magic into a new spell. A light so strong and pure that nothing could escape it. It would purge the darkness from whatever it hit, ripping it apart. It could encase us. We've talked about something like this before. Remember?'*

*'The flash of light.'* Harry thought.

*'Bingo. Maybe I should try to fill your head with everything that goes through mine a little more often. I might warm you to the idea.'*

*'You're insane.'*

*'What?'*

*'You told me earlier that my magical core's been unstable since we fought Terry. What do you think trying anything more powerful will do?! My magical core would shatter!'*

*'...Okay, okay. I haven't worked out all the bugs. But you see what I'm talking about, right! What if... what if I found a way to protect the core from the force of the spell? I may have to split it... ...yeah, maybe if... no, no, that's no good! Shit. ...I'll get back to ya on this one, kid. I need to think.'*

*'I'm not going to like anything you come up with.'* Harry thought, scowling once again.

*'...One day, kid, you're going to realize that you need me. You refusing to accept your own power is the real danger here. Let me in. We won't NEED the Gauntlet. If we can combine back into one, no one will stop us.'*

*'I'm never going to lose control again like I did against Terry. Never.'*

*'You say that now. Reality isn't so kind. I'll throw the idea around, though - see what it hits. I'll figure out a way to destroy the Altered. You have to take risks sometimes, kid. You want to save the world but aren't willing to throw it all on the line for your cause. You're no hero. You're just a confused little brat unwilling to accept reality for what it is. And if you aren't careful - if you insist on being so weak - I'll take control of your body. You'll be the one talking to me inside our*

*head instead of it being the other way around as it is now. Become stronger or be ruled by someone who will.'*

Harry felt something then, and he knew the creature had left him. He let out a long breath and let his eyes open. The room was still busy with people talking, strategizing, and wondering how they could ever hope to win. It really was too early for all of this. Harry got to his feet, bringing a hand up to rub his temples, and he headed for the door without saying a word to anyone. He heard several say his name, but he had to get away from them all. He needed time to think. He needed to be alone.

As he headed up the stairs, hearing a handful of people trailing behind him a ways, he pondered what the creature had suggested to him. A pure light capable of cutting through any darkness, huh? If the creature merely taking command caused his magical core danger, what would happen if he tried using such an overpowered spell? If he wasn't left a squib, he would certainly be in a coma for several weeks at the least.

And yet... he was stumped as to how to combat the Altered. If a Patronus truly couldn't work against them, what would? They would certainly be as resistant to magic as their regular counterparts were. And this was still failing to take into account the apparent fact that the damned things could fly.

Hissing out the password to his bedroom door, Harry quickly slipped inside, shut it behind him, and locked it. As he plodded towards the bed, he looked down at the chest sitting at its end. Pausing, he turned and knelt beside it, opening it and rummaging around until he found the Eye of Caspar. Taking it out, he closed the trunk and threw himself onto his bed.

"We're in trouble, Boris." Harry murmured, staring up at the top of the bed, his thumb slowly running over the gemstone's smooth surface. "And I'm not sure how to get us out of it."

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Every morning for the next week, reports started to filter in. They came slow at first, with eye witnesses claiming to have seen

something that looked like a flying Dementor soaring over their neighborhoods. Harry had long since insisted that, though his birthday was going to be soon, they didn't celebrate. There was too much going on to stop and have a party. Though he met with a number of objections, most notably by Mrs. Weasley, he got his way in the end. He would try and take some time off at Christmas, if the war would allow it. For now, he had more important things than turning 16 on his mind.

Dumbledore had also informed him of the date that he would be meeting the new Minister of Magic. Rufus Scrimgeour wanted to talk to Harry on the morning of the 3rd of August. Harry had once more agreed to meet the new Minister. Dumbledore hadn't yet mentioned anything in regards to how much he and Scrimgeour had talked. If Harry's betting pile amounted to merely the info about the Altered, he wasn't going to be in very good shape. He had yet to hear anything from the creature of light, which suited him just fine.

He had also picked up a bit of a bad habit in the week that had passed. He had started taking the Eye of Caspar around with him within Number Twelve, rubbing it as one would a worry stone. Others had noticed, but none of them had called him out on it yet, to which he was grateful. He didn't outwardly show it due to tightening his Occlumency defenses, but he was worried. Very worried. Voldemort currently had the upper hand. And, as much as Harry didn't like to think about it, it seemed the only thing to do was wait for the creature of light to think up a plan. Something stronger than a Patronus that didn't cause further damage to his magical core.

There was also something weighing heavily on Harry's mind. Without a shadow of doubt, he was going to go forward with invoking a protector for the Pit at Hogwarts. But he had yet to really tell anyone about it. Out of them all, Draco knew the most. That was going to change. He was going to be bringing everyone into his room and sit them down. Best to get the shock out of the way now. It wouldn't do for anyone to go drawing wands and attempting to attack the creature he planned to summon. They'd probably get killed.

He waited until dinner was over that evening and everyone was slipping out of the room to inform them. A few asked questions on the

way back up, but Harry refused to say anything until after they had returned to his bedroom and the door was closed.

"What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room." Harry said, walking to his bed and sitting on the edge. "Understood?"

"Uh-oh. He's going all top secret on us." Fred Weasley said, nudging his twin, who nodded.

"He's an agent of Voldemort and has come to out himself, clearly." George said, jabbing a finger into the air.

"Think he's gonna admit he secretly loves Malfoy?" Fred asked, eyebrows raising.

Malfoy jerked his head to glare at the twins, as did Harry.

"Would you two shut up?!" Ginny hissed, grabbing her brothers' ears and yanking down sharply on them.

As the twins let out dual yelps, Harry allowed himself to smirk, the Eye of Caspar being rubbed in his left hand. "An agent of Voldemort, no. Something just as evil, perhaps. You know how I've said the Pit needs a guardian. Just in case."

"Finally going to tell us the full details, huh?" Malfoy asked, leaning back against the door.

"It isn't so much outward telling you as it is explaining my actions. I can't imagine most of you are going to be happy about what I've decided to do. But it's been in my head for some time now. Dumbledore knows and he plans to be there on the time of summoning. He's also going to help get me the materials I need to contact the other plane."

"Other plane?" Hermione repeated. "Harry? What are you planning to do?"

"Isn't it obvious? He clearly wants to bring something otherworldly into our own dimension!" Pansy said, smirking shrewdly. "What the hell have you got in store for us?"

Glancing aside at his friends, a strange grin crossed Harry's face as he asked, "What has a big mouth, pointy teeth, a whole mess of eyes, and is quite dangerous?"

"Sounds like Gin after our Eyefull Tower prank went wrong." George said in a stage whisper. He was promptly elbowed in the gut by his little sister.

Meanwhile, Pansy had her head in one hand and seemed to be laughing quietly. Hermione looked outright shocked. The latter girl sputtered for a moment before squeaking, "You can't be serious!"

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"They're... INSANE! Harry, haven't you read anything about them?"

"Of course I have. And there are colonies of sane ones. We're going to be getting in touch with one of them. I've got the incantation written somewhere safe and, as I've said, Dumbledore's going to be there when I try and make the whole thing work." Harry explained.

"How do you know it won't betray us? That's what I want to know." Malfoy said.

"Beholders are fierce creatures, I'll admit. But if we have a sane one under contract to protect us until such time as it isn't required, I see no problems. Only those I decree fit to enter the Pit will be allowed. Otherwise, they'll be taken down in some fashion. If the headmaster had any objections, he hasn't voiced them so far. And you have to admit, no one on Voldemort's side would be expecting a beholder to fly at them. I'd imagine the house elves can help in keeping it fed and watered. Not entirely sure what a sane beholder would eat, but that's something I can discuss whenever I summon one, isn't it?" Harry said.

"You're barking, Potter. Has anyone told you that?" Malfoy asked.

"Loads of them!" Harry happily responded, smiling at the Slytherin.

"So that's what you gathered us for, huh?" Tonks said, finally speaking up. "Harry, you're out of your mind."

"And that's why all of you love me!" Harry declared.

"I think I'm going to be ill." Malfoy stated.

"If you are, get out of my room." Harry said, making a shooing motion with the hand not holding the Eye. "Anyway... that's my plan. I'm going through with it whether any of you like it or not. So I suggest you get used to the idea of one being around."

"Why, though?" Tonks asked. "The Pit's never been compromised."

"So far. With Voldemort and the Citadel flying now, there's no telling when he might attack. I want the extra protection. I'd sleep sounder knowing something was guarding us. I can't be expected to do everything, can I?" Harry asked.

"You're getting paranoid in your old age." Pansy said.

"Constant vigilance." Harry purred, a mad look in his eyes that vanished almost immediately. He blinked a few times, looking annoyed with himself, before facing the group again. "So. Thoughts?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea." Hermione said, crossing her arms.

"Can we make it chase Ron?" Asked the twins.

"I'm going to hex your bits off if you don't stop that." Ginny growled, turning to face her brothers.

As the Weasley twins stepped away from their little sister, Pansy spoke up. "What happens if the beholder doesn't want to make a contract with you? If it decides to attack?"

"That's why Dumbledore's there. To stop it if I can't." Harry said.

"And he's really okay with this?" Tonks asked.

"No objections. Makes me wonder if he hasn't been in contact with a few exotic species over the years." Harry said, raising an eyebrow. "...Anyway, the briefing is over now. Like I said, none of this leaves this room. Understand?"

"Aye aye, King Raven!" Chorused the twins, saluting Harry.

"Ginny?" Harry said.

"My pleasure." Ginny said, smiling sweetly as she stalked towards her older brothers again.

"I believe we're going to be in trouble if she catches us, George." Fred stated, moving away from Ginny again.

"I believe you're right. Shall we beat a hasty retreat?" Fred asked.

"Weasleys don't retreat. We advance in the opposite direction!" George said.

And with that, the twins advanced straight out the door after quickly unlocking it. Ginny took off after them, causing them to let out yelps. Their voices trailed off, and it sounded to Harry as though the twins were making a break for the kitchen.

"Just be careful, alright?" Hermione said, looking over at Harry. "The last thing we need is for something to happen to you or Dumbledore."

"I'll be fine, Hermione." Harry said, getting to his feet and walking towards the group. "I promise."

"Yes, well... I'll believe it when I see it." Hermione said, looking worried still.

"And I'm sure you'll re-read everything you can about them between now and then. And drive me crazy with the facts." Harry said, grinning.

Hermione swatted him on the arm before turning to leave. "Hmph. If I wanted to drive you crazy with the facts, I'd do it now. Probably need to go pull Ginny off her brothers in case they didn't get to Mrs. Weasley, though."

"And you two?" Harry asked, looking at the Slytherins.

"I can't say I'm not interested. Just nervous. I don't know as much as Granger about them, but everything I have read hasn't painted a pretty picture." Pansy said.

"It's your call. Like you said, you're doing it no matter how we think." Malfoy said, shrugging lopsidedly.

"Gotta look out for the people around me, don't I?" Harry asked.  
"Make up for the lousy job of it I've done so far."

"To make up for those who've died so far?" Asked Malfoy.

"Something like that." Harry said, glancing down at the Eye. "If anyone threatens us, I'm letting the beholder out and hunting them down. Zero tolerance. I don't care if it was said as a joke. If anyone says something indicating they might try anything - and I'm talking mainly about the Death Eater children here - then they're going to have a staring contest with the beholder."

"Just promise me one thing, Potter." Malfoy said.

"What?"

"Let me be there to watch if you do that."

"Will do."

Smirking, Malfoy nudged Pansy. "Want to go down and watch the inevitable circus unfolding downstairs?"

"Ooh, yes. Want to place bets on who's winning?" Pansy asked.

"Are you kidding? The girl's probably being held back by Granger and still winning." Malfoy said.

"You're on. Coming to watch, Harry?" Pansy asked.

"Nah. I need to think some more. Lemme know how it turns out." Harry replied.

"Sure."



And with that, the Slytherins left. Pansy was faster down the stairs than Malfoy was, and Harry could hear her shouting something about one of the twins having bat-bogeys dive bombing his backside. Harry shook his head slowly, turning to look at Tonks. "We're in a madhouse."

"So it would seem. Well..." Tonks began, fidgeting slightly.

"Well?"

"I should be going too. You wanted some time to think, right?" Tonks asked.

"...My mind won't shut down if you're around, Nymmy." Harry said, pushing the door closed. "Though I can't promise I'll be very talkative."

"Understandable." Tonks said, watching Harry walk to the bed. Tentatively following, she sat down next to him. "Does it make you feel calm?"

"The Eye? ...Yeah. It does." Harry said, holding the stone up. "I dunno. It's almost as though it's resonating. I can't explain it any better. It just... feels nice."

Tonks reached over and put a finger on the top of the Eye. "...I don't feel anything."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe it can just tell. Y'know - that you're the one who's assembling the Gauntlet again."

"Could be." Harry said, laying back and closing his eyes. "I hope it doesn't get disappointed. I hope we can actually find a way into Azkaban to get the other one. And figure out how to get a new Philosopher's Stone. There's just so damn much to do, Nym, I dunno if I can handle the load."

"So spread it around." Tonks said. "Stop trying to do everything by yourself."

"I'm trying. But it's not easy for someone like me." Harry murmured.

Laying back as well, Tonks looked at Harry and smiled. "Things'll work out in the end, Harry. They always have. We're proof of that."

"Heh. Yeah, I guess we are." Harry said, glancing to the side. "Nym?"

"Yeah?"

"Wanna go get your trunk?"

"I'd love to."

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Author's Notes: So I have my old PC files back. I'm sorry if this chapter was a little jerky in its pacing or if I forgot something. Almost three months of not writing book 6 has left me feeling rusty. Plus the urge to write still hasn't returned fully. After being mostly inactive over a sixth of the year, it'll probably take a few more chapters to get back into the swing of things and hit a groove again. Please bear with me as I try to get my writer's head back on straight.

So here we've learned a few things. Harry's wild magic side (which I really need to think up a name for or something, as using 'the creature of light' is getting a bit annoying) is a dick and Dementors (at least the Altered ones) have gained flight. Azkaban's officially airborne and the conduit stone is still inside. And then there's still the problem with the Philosopher's stone.

I have the important scenes - the BIG ones - written. It's all a build-up to that. You may have noticed Luna and Leon aren't around at Number Twelve. I think Luna isn't there, anyway. Pretty sure she isn't. I didn't see any mention of the Lovegoods anywhere in book 6 so far, anyhow. But Leon isn't there for a reason, which will be revealed a few chapters down the line. He won't show up until Hogwarts, though.

So... yeah. I really don't have a lot to say. Citadel's officially pulling back out of the station after a hideously long holdover. And, with any luck, I'll be able to stick out two chapters a month. Optimally I'd like to

do three. Maybe with a bit more time and once the story really gets going. Until next time, folks!

Edit: Well, kids, FFN decided Notepad files (plain old .txt, which I do all my writing in) shouldn't be allowed to be edited on-site. Same for Wordpad files or... whatever the devil this thing's default format is. But if you C&P into Wordpad, edit there (ie, add bold/italicized things, which is what is being stripped from my .txt files when I try to use the site's editor) and then upload THAT resulting file, it seems to do fine. I don't know why. It's completely stupid and this is the only time I'm doing it. If the site is still doing this by the time I finish Chapter 6, I'm finding some other site to upload the rest of book 6 and all of book 7 to. I shouldn't have to jump through hoops to upload and format a text file, nor do I plan to.

## Chapter 6 – A Line on the Sand

Harry glanced aside at Tonks' sleeping form, huddled under the blanket next to him. He allowed himself a faint smile as he slowly slipped out of bed. Grabbing a loose, open shirt from the dresser, he slipped it on and left his bedroom. It was somewhere in the realm of two in the morning. He couldn't sleep. Despite his brush with near-crippling insomnia the previous year, he didn't mind being awake tonight. A new puzzle had been poured out onto the table and he was incapable of rest until he fit some of it together.

The house was quiet tonight - a rare occurrence at Number Twelve. It had been a hard week. A few days had passed since Harry was awakened from his dream with the knowledge that Azkaban was airborne now. He was due to meet with the new Minister later today. Despite this, he couldn't sleep.

Number Twelve felt tense, if one could call it that. The house felt almost the same to Harry as Hogwarts did. It felt like it was just shy of being alive due to the amount of magic that occurred within its walls.

Sighing, he let his mind wander as he entered the library, heading over to the couch and throwing himself down on it. Crossing his arms behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling. New Minister, new problems with Voldemort, trying to get a Stone, trying to rescue Balthazar, wondering how to deal with Solieyu, and thinking about whether or not he'd crack under the stress of it all.

He and Tonks had resurrected their sleeping schedule after so long of being apart. It had been nice being together with Pansy, and he wasn't regretting his decision one bit, but it was different when it was Tonks. He couldn't put into words what it was, though. Things just fell back into place. And while Harry had caught Pansy casting him a wistful look when she thought he wouldn't notice, he knew better. He just hoped that she would be alright in the end.

Bringing a hand up, Harry removed his glasses so he could rub at the bridge of his nose. The whole summer had been one giant nightmare with a few fleeting moments of happiness. Not for the first time, he wondered what Number Four was like these days, with Vernon living

by himself. And not for the first time, Harry morbidly hoped that his uncle would either starve to death due to having no one to cook for him or eat so much take-out that he would die from some heart-related problems. Maybe a heart attack in the throes of starvation.

No matter what scenarios Harry thought of, they weren't good enough. They'd never be good enough. The only way Harry would feel vindicated was if he could be the one to strike the killing blow. Vernon Dursley wasn't the same breed of evil as Voldemort, not by any stretch of the imagination, but evil he still was. A different type of evil. One that you put up with over the course of your life due to the simple fact that there was literally no way to get away from it.

Another sigh escaping his dry lips, Harry slid his glasses back on. He needed... contacts. His glasses were a source of constant irritation to him. And he still found it hard to believe that despite the wonders available in the magical world, there was no cure for bad eyesight. He made a mental note to ask about potential magical contacts, tucking it away in the corner of his mind not occupied by other things.

Would Rufus Scrimgeour be more willing to accept the truth than Fudge had been? Moreover, would the man launch some sort of deep-searching investigation about Death Eaters working at the Ministry? What stance the Minister took would influence a lot.

Letting his eyes slip shut, Harry started to try mentally mapping out what Azkaban now looked like. He had only ever seen pictures of the island, after all. And if he were perfectly honest with himself, he had no idea how such a relatively small place could be twisted into an impervious fortress. Clearly, Voldemort had done something to the prison itself if he was calling it a Citadel now. Harry scowled. Too much he didn't know. It was infuriating. There was nothing he could research as something like this had never *happened* before! Only Voldemort was mad enough to think of creating a floating island out of the Dementors' playground.

Choking his anger down and locking it back up, he took a few deep breaths before he began to hum quietly. He hadn't had any reason to openly sing for a long time. Even humming had become a rare occurrence. When Harry had been younger, before his relatives had

squashed all of his hopes out of him, Harry wondered if he could start a band. Even if Harry came out successful, something he was fully planning to accomplish, that dream would never happen. He had, at some point, become thoroughly tone deaf.

He was also starting to wonder about Boris. The little taipan seemed to talk less and less these days, instead choosing to lounge around in Harry's room, curled up in the same spot on the table next to Harry's side of the bed. He had a feeling the snake was finally starting to reach the end of his magically extended life. Despite wanting to believe otherwise, Harry also had a feeling that Boris would enjoy finally passing on. He had, after all, seen and done quite a bit, a good portion of which one could consider to be bad memories.

Harry didn't want to think about life without Boris around. For a snake, he was exceptionally intelligent. Boris himself had stated that most snakes - at least, none of the ones he had been in contact with over the years - didn't seem quite as intelligent as he was. Whether this was the truth or Boris just boasting was something Harry still wasn't entirely sure of. In any case, Harry didn't think he could just find another companion snake after Boris died. It didn't work like that. That would be like having your best friend being killed, then turning around and skipping along to find a new one.

This train of thought brought Harry to Solieyu. The vampire and his mother weren't staying at Number Twelve. In fact, Harry hadn't heard anything from him all summer. And whenever he'd ask Dumbledore, the old wizard just smiled and reassured him that the Reinhardt family was safe. It was almost as though Dumbledore thought he couldn't quite trust Harry with the information.

Tonks was free from Solieyu's vampiric charms for now, but what would happen once they all returned to Hogwarts? Would everything settle back into how it had been the previous year? Would he find himself back in Pansy's arms? Or had Solieyu been forced to admit that his powers had been out of control? Harry was hoping for that last one. It would mean that Harry could concentrate on the road ahead rather than having to look over his shoulder at the road he had been traveling down.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted as the door to the library opened. Tonks, wearing a long shirt and wobbling slightly, slipped in and closed the door behind her. She walked over to Harry, who had sat up upon her arrival, and flopped down unceremoniously on his lap. She leaned against him and let her eyes slip shut again.

"You moved." She murmured sleepily.

"And you got dressed." Harry observed, wrapping his arms around the girl.

"Course I did." Tonks said, laying her head on Harry's shoulder. "Whatchu doin' down here, anyway?"

"Lost in thought. Sorry." Harry said.

"S'okay. You done thinkin'?"

Harry chuckled. "I suppose so. You're going to haul me back to bed one way or another, so I may as well go willingly."

"Good boy." Tonks giggled. She sighed as she got back up, stretching slightly. "Come, pillow."

Your services are still required."

Harry snorted as he stood up. "You're really goofy when you're half-asleep. And when the hell was I relegated to pillow duty?"

"You started tonight." Tonks declared, jabbing a finger in the air.

"And I wasn't informed because...?"

"More fun that way." Tonks said, stepping over and kissing Harry on the nose. "C'mon. If I stay awake much longer, I might actually wake up fully."

"Yes yes, let's go." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he followed Tonks out of the library.

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At ten that morning, Harry found himself walking in step beside Dumbledore as they walked through the Ministry of Magic. Harry had dressed casually, in a dark blue t-shirt and a pair of jeans, though his emotions were completely locked away. He was emitting a strong, cold aura - he had been told as much by no fewer than five people before they even left Number Twelve. But emotions would have only gotten in the way. He was meeting an unknown to determine the man's position in the world - he wasn't going to show any form of weakness.

His emotions had also been forced on lockdown for a completely different reason. Nine floors below them was where Sirius had met his end and where Harry had become damaged. Nine floors down had been where that *thing* had awakened. Harry didn't want to think about it. And while he couldn't help but do so, the pain and sorrow never came. He would give himself some time to wind down after returning to Number Twelve. Right now, he had business to take care of.

Through several hallways and past many security checks the two walked. If it hadn't been forced down with the rest, Harry would have been getting impatient. He thought it better to seem cold and calculating as opposed to a nervous teenager, though. First impressions being what they were, it wouldn't do good for Scrimgeour to see Harry as he normally was.

And, after what felt like an hour of being on the move, they finally came to a halt outside the Minister's office. Harry glanced aside at Dumbledore, who knocked three times. A moment passed by before a gruff voice from inside beckoned them in. Dumbledore smiled and opened the door, allowing Harry entry first.

Harry stepped in and looked across the room. Rufus Scrimgeour, looking all the world like a man just out of prison, was seated behind his desk. His appearance certainly wasn't what Harry had expected. He was planning on another man of Fudge's stature being in office. This man, however...

"Rufus." Dumbledore said, shutting the door behind himself. "I take it all is well?"



"As well as can be expected." Scrimgeour said, finally getting to his feet. "They've got me signing papers day and night and all of them are running around like chickens with their heads cut off. I've barely had the time to eat and sleep."

"Then thank you for granting us so much of it." Dumbledore said. Stepping behind Harry, he nodded at the boy. "Rufus, this would be Harry Potter. Harry, Rufus Scrimgeour - former head of the Auror Office."

"How do you do?" Harry said, his voice almost toneless as he extended his hand.

"How do you do?" Scrimgeour repeated, shaking Harry's hand. "A pleasure to finally meet you. You left quite a few stories in your wake here."

"It happens a lot." Harry said. "I've gotten used to it."

Scrimgeour motioned for the two to sit down as he walked back around his desk to do the same. "You're probably wondering just why I wanted you to come in. I realize you might see it as being dangerous, coming here again so soon, after what happened on your last 'visit.'"

Taking a seat, Harry shrugged slightly. "Sizing one another up, I imagine. As for the potential for danger, I'm capable of taking care of myself, thank you."

Dumbledore sat across from Harry, reaching into his robes and pulling out a small dish of sweets. Placing it on the edge of Scrimgeour's desk, he picked one up and began to unwrap it. He was there merely to serve as a mediator in case one was needed, as well as to ensure Harry's protection. He hadn't gone over anything with Harry, so he was eager to see where the conversation would take itself.

"So I've heard." Scrimgeour said, lifting his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. "It's no secret that you and Cornelius Fudge never saw eye to eye. I'd like to rectify any possible damage my predecessor has done. Whether you like it or not, the public does see

you in high regards. You've seen the papers? They're starting to refer to you by even more ridiculous nicknames."

"I try to ignore those." Harry stated. "The public will think what they will. As for the damage Fudge has done, it's in the past. There's no sense in worrying over it."

Nodding slowly, Scrimgeour leaned back in his chair, sizing Harry up for a few seconds before continuing, "I was hoping you'd say that. Harry, I've spoken to Albus a few times since being chosen to fill the Minister's seat, and he's told me a number of interesting things."

"Such as?"

"Such as the Order of the Phoenix. Such as a list of those supposedly working for Voldemort that have infiltrated my Ministry."

"You say his name." Harry observed.

"Fearing a name is stupid. Do you know how many pontificating twits I've dealt with who have given themselves nicknames over the years? It's his power you need to have a healthy respect for, not his damn name." Scrimgeour stated.

"Have you been informed on his current plans?" Harry asked.

"Albus has told me a few things I haven't enjoyed, yes." Scrimgeour said.

"Any ideas on how to stop a floating island, Minister?" Harry asked, allowing himself a faint smile.

"If wizard-Muggle relations weren't what they were, I'd just ask the Muggle Minister to bomb the damned thing back into gravel. That not being possible, though, I'm at a loss. I've got enough to worry about in the Ministry itself. I've not been able to cut a path wide enough to see past the horizon." Scrimgeour said.

"I'm afraid what I know amounts to exceedingly little in the grand scheme of things." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"Albus said you knew of what's powering the place. He was being quite vague on the matter, however..." Scrimgeour said, scowling at Dumbledore.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Rufus." Dumbledore said, smiling pleasantly as he popped another Merangue Mint into his mouth.

"I bet you don't." Scrimgeour muttered. Turning his attention back to Harry, who was also giving Dumbledore a withering look, he asked, "So what's he got?"

"Two things as far as I know in regards to the island's flying. He's channelled a massive amount of power through a gemstone known as the Soul of Balthazar. As for what it was channelled into, I'm not sure. Whatever it is, Riddle is keeping it a secret from everyone. But it's there, and I suspect it to be in the most heavily defended part of Azkaban. Whether that's now the top or the bottom, I've no earthly idea." Harry explained.

"Orb of Daedalus, probably. Damned thing pops up every so often. Usually when some lunatic's running around trying to purify the wizarding population. Albus?"

"Most likely, though it would be foolish to rule out other devices." Dumbledore chimed in.

"What kind of device is it?" Harry asked, glancing between the older men.

"Giant sphere. Usually, it's inert. Takes a lot of power to fuel the thing. If this gemstone you speak of was used to help amplify what he fed to it, it would explain a lot." Scrimgeour said. "I ran into some poor slob trying to sell it almost ten years ago. We confiscated it and holed it up down below here at the Ministry. Not sure what happened, but not two years later, it had gone missing. No traces of anyone coming or going."

"Aside from that, Voldemort has created Altered Dementors. They can fly now. At the present time, we have no idea how to stop them."

Harry said, eyes narrowing. "We know he's planning an attack. And we have no way of stopping it."

The Minister swore under his breath. "The Patronus Charm doesn't work?"

"Negative." Harry said. "The trouble is, we need to run recon on the things to see what they're even capable of. As it stands, no one's seen one in action."

"Tough to do when the only way we're likely to see them is when they attack somewhere." Scrimgeour said, bushy eyebrows raising.

"So let Voldemort's impending attack happen." Harry said.

There was a chill lingering in the air after Harry finished speaking. Dumbledore looked downright shocked. The Minister's brow had creased, but he was nodding slowly. Seeing an opening, Harry continued, "When you get word of the attacks, and I'm sure word will indeed reach before they end, send your best men out to observe. No matter what happens, they must not interfere. Voldemort will likely use this as a test to see what we do. And since we know we can't do anything, there's no use sending innocent people to their graves."

"And yet the innocent will still die." Dumbledore said.

"A necessary evil." Harry said, turning to stare at his headmaster, as though *daring* the man to try getting inside his head. "By observing, we might find a chink in the armor. I'm working on a possible way to deal with the Altered. But until I'm sure it can be used, I don't want anyone to die who doesn't have to."

"So you are willing to allow Voldemort to kill Muggles as he wishes?" Dumbledore asked, a hard glint in his eyes.

"They'll survive." Harry sneered. "They outnumber us quite a bit, *sir*. Our kind, however, cannot afford the losses. This is a war. People are going to die. Sacrifices have to be made. And if we send Aurors and Order members in without having any clue as to how to act, they'll be gunned down alongside the Muggles they were sent to protect."

Before Dumbledore could reply, Scrimgeour spoke up. "He makes a lot of sense. Don't look at me like that, Albus. I'm fully aware of your stance on saving people. But he's right - this is a war. I don't like the thought of letting Muggles die any more than either of you do. I'm the one who's going to have to deal with the Muggle Minister when this hits the fan, remember. I'm merely saying that Harry has a point. I've fought a lot of battles in my years, Albus. I know what it's like to be out there in the thick of it. I also know when it's unwise to go in guns blazing, to borrow an expression. If you've a better idea, I'd love to hear it. Have *you* thought of a way to combat these Altered Dementors?"

Dumbledore looked like someone had ruined his birthday party. It only lasted for a moment, however, but Harry took it in while he could. Preaching absolute protection while sending one's troops in unprepared was the sign of a bad leader. The Pawns would only take so much before revolting against their King. That revolt had long since begun in Harry's mind. The headmaster's intentions were noble, certainly. But they were as far from practical as they could be.

"I have not. However..." Dumbledore finally began.

"However," Scrimgeour interrupted, "is enough to ensure that I keep my Aurors inside when the bogeyman is prancing outside the door. I won't have them rushing in like fools only to get their souls sucked out... or whatever these new Dementors do."

"Rip you apart, mostly." Harry said. "Eat you if you're unlucky. Carry you back to Azkaban if you're very unlucky."

"That. Albus, I want to keep the Muggle side of Great Britain safe just as you do. Understand that. But there's wisdom in the boy's words. Surely you see that."

"He's going to attack orphanages, Rufus." Dumbledore said, fixing the Minister with a dark look. "He's going to let his Dementors kill and eat children."

Scrimgeour gave Dumbledore his own dark look as he once more leaned back in his chair. With a faint smirk on his face, he spoke again. "Then let us do this, Albus. When the time comes, and when

the attacks begin, you send your own men and women out in a vain attempt at keeping those children safe. You tell me how your people fare, seeing as how you're so willing to throw their lives away."

As Dumbledore started to rebut, Harry closed his eyes and smiled. The White King was being assaulted by his own side and had nowhere to run.

"If there is even a glimmer of hope, we will find it." Dumbledore said, a hard edge to his voice now. "But I will not sit idly by and let anyone die if something can be done about it."

"What hope can you find, Albus? When your Order rushes in to save those kids and end up being unable to halt those Dementors, then what? Continue and do the same the next time they show up? Assume that they'll turn their attention to your men rather than continue their attack on those in the orphanages? Tell me, Albus, do you not give a damn for anyone under your watch?"

"Of course I care for them. More than you could possibly imagine." Dumbledore stated.

"Then act like it!" Scrimgeour barked. Harry cracked open an eye as the Minister continued, "For god's sake, Albus, can't you see what you're going to do? You're knowingly sending them to their slaughter! People are going to die no matter what - we *have* to be able to get some kind of useful information out of this!"

"And we *will*." Dumbledore insisted.

"Oh? You've learned a way to glean information from corpses, have you?" Scrimgeour asked coldly.

A silence fell in the room then. Harry opened his other eye and, after allowing himself to soak up the tension in the room, said, "I'll write when I find out the attacks have started. Hedwig flies fast. You don't need to reply. Just get someone out there to monitor what's happening."

"And to collect the dead for when the Order get themselves killed." Scrimgeour added, glaring across the desk at Dumbledore, whose

face was blank. Hiding his thoughts and forcing himself to calm back down, Harry imagined.

"To change topics," Harry suddenly said, "What are you doing in regards to Death Eaters who have infiltrated the Ministry?"

"Using the information given to us to root them out." Scrimgeour said.

"And then what?" Asked Harry.

"Veritaserum." Scrimgeour said, smiling grimly.

"Without their permission?" Harry asked, eyebrow raising slightly.

"I'm the Minister and they work for the enemy. If they're allowed to break the rules, so am I."

Harry smiled. "I like the way you think."

"Well, that's one less thing to worry about then." Scrimgeour said, grinning crookedly. "I'd like, at some point this year - and I'd imagine it's going to be not long after that attack happens - for you and I to make a statement to the press. That you've got some semblance of trust back with the Ministry."

"It would be my pleasure. Voldemort's going to get a rather large ego boost if we let the attack occur. Whether the Order decides to jump into the fray is out of my control, but as I've said, we have no way to stop the Altered. I want to publically state our plan after the fact. I'm sure we'll get some backlash for it, yes, but think of what it would do to poor Tommy Riddle. He'll be pissed off at being played like that. And when Voldemort is pissed off, he gets sloppy. His emotions run wild, being uncontrolled by his Occlumency, and when that happens, I'll likely be able to feel and possibly see what he's up to." Harry explained, tapping his scar slowly. "And any information we *might* be able to get is worth the loss of a handful of innocents."

"A few holes in there that I can think of. But I'd like to go along with it. Because while you may have a few holes in your plan, your thought process is like that of Aurors who have served many, many years. The needs of the many. The faster we collect information, the faster

we can stop subsequent attacks. You keep working on that idea of yours, Harry. I'll get my men on researching Dementors. Maybe between the two of us we can find an answer." Scrimgeour said.

"It would be nice. I need the Soul of Balthazar." Harry said.

"Albus explained a bit about that. You're compiling items to resurrect an old relic, correct?" Scrimgeour asked.

"The Gauntlet of the Magi, yes. I've got the Gauntlet itself, I've got the Eye thanks to the Ministry, and I've got Ravenclaw's Staff. The Staff will be used in place of the hundred wands normally required for the forging. But that leaves the Soul and a Philosopher's Stone." Harry explained.

"...Actually, I may have a few ideas in regards to needing that many wands. Let me check a few things and get back to you. I'd imagine a power so great would overtax and ultimately destroy the Staff. It would be a shame to lose such a thing to the ages." Scrimgeour said.

"You have an alternative?" Harry said, brow creasing.

"I might. Let's not worry about that for now, though. It isn't a sure thing and I don't want to get your hopes up." Scrimgeour said.

"Any ideas on a Philosopher's Stone?" Harry asked.

"I'm afraid not. In all the years I've worked as an Auror, I've never had a run-in with one. I heard about the one that was kept at Hogwarts a few years back. Albus tells me it was destroyed." Scrimgeour said.

"All but a small fragment." Harry said, nodding. "And it's too small to use for the Gauntlet. I need a full, working Stone."

"I'll see if any of the boys might have any leads." Scrimgeour said. Before he could continue, a knock came at the door. Looking up, he called, "Who is it?"

"You've got a meeting in ten minutes, Minister." Came a young-sounding woman's voice from the other side of the door. "You wanted me to remind you when it was approaching."



"That much time has passed already?" Scrimgeour muttered. Then, louder, he called, "Alright, I'll finish things up. I'll be there shortly, Ophilia."

The Minister showed them out, apologizing for being so busy all the time, and left to get to his meeting. Without a word, Dumbledore began walking. Smirking at his back, Harry slid his hands into his pockets and followed. The old man was *mad*. Oh, this had been an absolutely delicious day. He had gone into the meeting with the express intent on shaking things up, and it had worked like a charm. And now Harry had the Minister of Magic's side in the matter. He rather enjoyed talking to Scrimgeour. The man was practical and knew what it meant to be in the thick of it. Dumbledore, on the other hand, ran things like a puppetmaster, staying somewhere safe while his minions did all the work. In that regard, he was worse than Voldemort, who at least had the nerve to show his face from time to time.

The two made their way back through the checkpoints and to the designated apparition spot. They would appear under cover of illusion at the end of Grimmauld Place and make their way back to Number Twelve from there. When Dumbledore tapped him on the head, Harry bit another smirk back. It had been purposely rough. Harry wondered who would be around to see the inevitable fight that would break out once they returned.

Harry was left momentarily dizzy after they had apparated, as he usually was. He couldn't quite make Dumbledore out under the spell, but he knew where he was. Hands sliding back into his pockets, he trailed the headmaster back to the spot the house should have been. A quick thought recalled and there it was. Once the two were up on the porch, Dumbledore once more jabbed Harry's head to remove the spell. He then turned the door and opened it. Harry walked in behind him and closed it.

"What were you doing?" Dumbledore asked immediately, facing away still. His voice was quiet.

"What needs to be done." Harry stated, letting some emotion bleed into his voice finally.

"Innocent people need to be killed?" Asked Dumbledore, turning and looking down at Harry. Despite their age, Dumbledore had a few inches of height on him yet.

"Our side is woefully small as is. You, however, don't care." Harry said, stepping past the headmaster and aiming towards the living room, where he was sure he had heard people moving about. He wanted an audience. Letting more emotion color his voice, he continued, "You only care about your own sense of justice! You'll let good people die in a futile attempt at stopping the Altered's attack. And yet you yourself will never do as you command! You'll sit there, ordering others to their deaths, all the while believing yourself in the right!"

Harry heard Dumbledore begin to follow him, though the older man's footsteps were notably faster. As Harry stepped into the living room, Dumbledore caught up to him, spun him around, and grabbed the front of his shirt with one hand.

"You have no idea what it takes to give those orders." Dumbledore said, his voice filled with a cold fury. "You have no idea what it means to send men and women, many still in their prime, off to die!"

Harry just smirked once again. "Don't I? I think I know more than you, old man. I've been on the front lines more than you, have I not? You, on the other hand, decided to show up and be *utterly useless* at the battle under the Ministry! And while you did indeed keep Tommy occupied, you didn't do a god damned thing when Bellatrix went to slaughter Sirius. And don't you give me any of your prattling bullshit - you could have stopped him if you wanted to! You have no right to lead us, if one could even call it that anymore! You're all too willing to send the people in this room to their deaths, knowing full bloody well that none of them would return, but you'll never step into combat yourself unless forced! Do you deny that?!"

Dumbledore's head jerked up. The room was filled almost beyond what it could seat. No fewer than twelve sets of eyes were on the two of them now. And while half of those present were Harry's classmates, the side that were an active part of the war were giving Dumbledore

odd looks. He glanced down at Harry, whose smirk had changed to a victorious sneer.

Letting go of Harry's shirt, Dumbledore straightened himself up and closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he spoke in clipped tones. "Every person in this room; every person who I have ever had the pleasure of knowing who would follow me into hell itself... I care about each and every one of them, Harry."

Harry turned his back on Dumbledore, glancing across the room. Lupin and Andromeda were standing over by the fireplace. Kingsley Shacklebolt and a pair of Aurors Harry had never met were in one corner. Narcissa Malfoy was in another. Draco, Pansy, and Tonks were sitting on the couch and had apparently been in the middle of a game of Exploding Snap. The Weasley twins were sitting in chairs on either side of the coffee table and Hermione was in another lone chair. She had been reading, though the book now rested, closed, on her lap.

"This is your leader." Harry said, his voice dark. "This man, who claims he wants to protect the innocent yet will send the innocent to their deaths in the name of his justice. This man who, while barking orders, fails to understand the reality of the situation. The Altered will attack and he wants to send the Order to try and stop them. He knows full well we haven't found anything that can stop them. Thus, he must expect everyone to die. And in the little fantasy world he lives in, he must believe that you'll die delaying the Altered so that the Muggles will escape. Forget that Muggles would be terrified on the spot if they even saw a Dementor. Forget that magic will be flying around. Forget that Death Eaters, who will also be using magic, probably to torture those who don't run, will *a*lso probably be there. No. He wants to sacrifice our number so that he can continue to believe that he knows the right way to do everything!"

"That is not true and you know it." Came Dumbledore's voice. It still sounded cold, though the outright fury was no longer there.

"The Minister said it best himself, didn't he? You can send however many you want out there. The Aurors will be the ones bringing the corpses, if the Altered are kind enough to leave enough of the bodies

left, back to us. What will you tell the families of the fallen, Albus? That they sacrificed themselves in a vain attempt at heroism? That they died for the foolish dreams of an old man who believes everyone can be saved? You yourself proved to me last year that *that* isn't true. Everyone can't be saved. And the sooner you learn when to act and when to hold back, the fewer deaths you'll have on your consciousness." Harry said, looking over his shoulder at Dumbledore.

"What, *exactly*, is this all about, if I may interrupt?" Came Lupin's quiet voice.

"Isn't it obvious?" Harry asked, looking to the werewolf. "At the Ministry, I brought up the idea that we should let the first attack happen. That we bring in one or two people to stand back and observe - to collect information - so that in the future we aren't rushing blindly in. So that we might see *some* kind of weakness to exploit. But Albus, in his infinite dream of absolute protection, thinks that the Muggles' lives are worth more than our own kind's. That by potentially getting ripped to bits by an enemy we know piss-all about we will somehow be looked upon kindly. That the families of the dead won't complain. That he can continue to sit and look down on all of us."

"I think you're going a little too far..." Lupin said slowly.

"Am I, Moony?" Harry asked. "He knows those sent in will die. That there's very little hope for their survival. Why then would he do it? Why not hang back, accept the loss this time, and hope for information? The only difference is that my way, fewer people run the risk of dying. His way, everyone dies. But that seems to be alright since, with his twisted logic, this makes those sent in brave. There's a difference between being brave and being outright stupid. I think he's finally gotten past the point where he can coherently lead the Order. I won't have the deaths of any more of our people on my mind just because he feels the need to recklessly waste our number!"

"Do you think you could do better?" Came Dumbledore's quiet voice.

Harry turned to look at the man. "I think *Mundungus* could do better."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Believe what you wish, Harry. I will not change my stance on the matter. We will fight Voldemort at every turn. We will give the innocent a chance to continue living. We will not abandon them to terror and death."

Harry stared at the headmaster, shaking his head slowly. "You want them to live. You want them to be free of experiencing such things. Why do you not feel that compassion for our side? Why do you only care about whether the Muggles live or die? Why do you only care if they get tortured and traumatized? Because we have magic? Because we can wave a stick and say a few funny words to try and defend ourselves? There's no solution to a defensive strategy in this war. There's no sense in losing our men to a battle that anyone with any common sense could see is a lost cause. And you refuse to see it. Tell you what, Albus. Why don't you lead the attack, then?"

Dumbledore didn't respond to this, but Harry did notice a spark ignite in his eyes. The anger had returned.

"No answer. Because you don't want to die. Now think of those you're condemning to that exact fate. Think about that and try to sleep tonight, Albus." Harry said, his voice lowering in volume. "And when you wake up and realize I was right, I'll be waiting. And when those around you fail to obey your every command because they can see reality for what it is, I'll be waiting. This has all been one giant chess game for you. You, the White King, move your Pawns about, knowing they'll die. Knowing they'll do so because they feel obligated to help you. You've done everything in your power to hold me back. And because of your insistence that I return to Number Four every summer, my aunt and cousin are dead. If I hadn't been there, the Death Eaters never would have attacked. You've tried to mold me to be your own personal Anti-Voldemort Weapon - a perfect little Ravenclaw who overcomes the odds and protects your school for you. A perfect little chess piece to move in your stead so you can sit there and not do anything."

"Harry!" Lupin hissed from across the room.

"If you want to continue following him, be my guest." Harry said. "I'll miss you, Moony. I'll miss you because he'll give you an impossible

order, you'll blindly follow, and you'll get killed eventually. I'm not. Not any longer. From this point on, I'm doing things my way. Just because Albus Dumbledore was once a great wizard doesn't make him perfect. Nor does it make him the right leader. But people will continue to follow. Hero worship does terrible things to men and women. Because while Albus won't torture or kill his followers who disobey, he's not above laying on a guilt trip of legendary proportions. He's not above blatant manipulation. He wants to win. He wants to topple the Black King again, just as he did with Grindelwald. A once-noble wizard leading a war he has no business leading purely to try and attain his former glory at any cost. How utterly sickening. I'd rather follow Voldemort."

And with that, Harry left the room, leaving twelve sets of eyes focused solely on Dumbledore, whose own gaze was locked intensely on the floor.

Harry reveled in the silence he left in his wake. And, as he climbed the stairs, a flash of green light flickered at the corners of his eyes.

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Author's Notes: Chapter 7 will directly continue this one.

Things have been shaken up a bit, haven't they? Now let me get a few potential questions answered here and now. Do read them before questioning anything. If you've got anything that could be too in-depth, please feel free to email me. I don't check it that often, so please be patient.

First: Yes, Harry's observation of Tonks' state does mean what you think.

Second: No, it wasn't the creature of light in control of him today.

Third: NO, not even at the end.

See, kids, Dumbledore has done nothing correctly in regards to Harry's life, so why should Harry feels he owes the man anything? All the important people he knows have died due to Dumbledore, however indirect it was. Dumbledore has done nothing to save the

ones around Harry, though he is perfectly willing to cast away those who 'work' for him.

And fourth: Grindelwald is dead in this continuity. While I do love what Rowling did, there just isn't any place for Grindelwald here. Notice how I never said Dumbledore's feelings were different. So yes, Dumbledore has known and experienced a lot of pain and death, more than he may ever plan to tell Harry. Because he doesn't want anyone to go through what he did, he's going to try and do everything (however wrong it may seem) to try and reach these ends. A tragic story for a man who just wants to do what is right.

Until next time, dear readers.

Edit: Due to FFN stripping .txt files from being edited on-site, this is the process I've had to go through to get this chapter up: Upload the .txt file. Make sure there were no weird line breaks (dunno what causes this). Save this. Copy and paste this into Wordpad. Go in there and edit in all bold and italicized words. Save. Upload THAT file to FFN. And then scan that damn thing to make sure everything is fine. I tried just editing in Wordpad, but it resulted in an unformatted mess. There'd be one line, a blank line, then the next. The whole thing looked like that. I'm seriously thinking about moving books 6 and 7 somewhere else. If you know any good, quality, popular Potter fiction sites, email me.

## Chapter 7 – Cause and Effect

Harry slammed the door behind him as he entered his room, yanking his glasses off and rubbing the bridge of his nose. Difficult, but it had paid off. The old man had had it coming for a long time. The Eye was Harry's now. He would figure out a way to get the missing parts on his own. That the Minister might have a way to forgo needing Ravenclaw's Staff only helped cement the idea that he no longer needed Dumbledore's help. In fact, if he were to sit and rely on Dumbledore, who knew when he would be able to advance.

He had been hoping that Snape would have been around, but no dice there. Snape was the old man's right hand and a master of potions to boot. Harry just hoped no further confrontations between the two would arise over this. They had almost gotten on friendly speaking terms.

Almost.

*'That was impressive!'* Cried a voice from inside his head.

*'Yeah, I felt your little burst of applause as I was leaving.'* Harry thought, sitting on the edge of his bed and setting his glasses next to him.

*'Well, you really dressed him down. Did better than I did when he showed up back 'home!''* The voice said.

*'Things need to change. Albus Dumbledore is a man slow to react. He's a romanticist, not a leader. He thinks everyone and everything can be saved. He's lost the rational ability to see the forest for the trees. Scrimgeour, on the other hand, seems to think like I do.'* Harry thought, letting his eyes unfocus.

*'Yeah, he's a grizzled old bastard. I like him, too. I noticed you said you were working on a possible method to eliminate the Altered. Had a change of mind?'* Asked the creature.

*'Maybe. I've thought about splitting it, like you said. Tell me something, though.'*



'What?'

Harry looked up, staring off at the door to the bathroom. *'You said something about encasing ourself in the light. Can we use that and chain the big spell off it? Somehow create a buffer for it? Something that won't tax our magical core?'*

*'Can't be sure unless I test it. And I don't think you'd like what it would mean to train.'* Said the creature, its hollow voice sounding annoyed. *'It would be taxing on both of us and I can promise nothing.'*

'What kind of a strain would it put on our core?' Harry asked.

*'Mild, if all we're going for is the first part.'* Replied the creature. *'And since the Minister is obviously on our side, there's a good chance we could practice it here.'*

"And if something goes wrong?" Harry murmured aloud.

*'I'll focus all of our energy to our core to begin healing. It's not looking terrible, you know. It just received a few really nasty cracks the last time. And that was only because our emotions were wild and we weren't focusing. I could help keep things in line. What have we got to lose?'*

*'Do you really want me to answer that?'* Harry thought as he blew out a sigh.

*'Nah. Just sayin'. You just dressed down Albus Dumbledore. If anything's gonna come and bite us in the ass, it'll be that. So... wanna try?'*

The look in Harry's eyes intensified as he stood up. *'What do I need to do?'*

*'Think of it like your Dementor training went, because the same general idea applies. But we need to work off a different emotion.'* Said the voice.

'What emotion?'

'Anger.'

'Anger I can do.' Harry thought, smirking.

*'No wand will be used. My only concern is our... lack of consistent wandless magical talent. Still wanna give it a shot?'*

'What have we got to lose?' Harry asked. He could almost feel the creature grin.

*'Instead of summoning a Patronus, we're going to channel its power to surround our body. A sort of Patronus Armor, if you will. In theory, anything that gets near us would be destroyed by our light. It's going to start being silver. The better we get, the closer we'll get to achieving a perfect forming of it. Then it will be pure white. I won't lie - it's going to take an enormous amount of energy to sustain, if I've done my calculations right. You're gonna be worn out no matter what. As much as I hate to admit it, I don't think we're strong enough to hold the form for very long.'*

'Have we thought of an incantation for this Patronus Armor?' Harry asked.

'Patronum Contego.' Came the reply.

'Doesn't sound right.'

*'It isn't my fault we're not a scholar of Latin.'* Grouched the voice. *'It was the closest we could get. Shield, armor, it's all the same in the end. It will guard us.'*

'Okay, so if we do succeed in this spell... then what? What's the big one? The one that could do us real damage?' Harry asked.

*'A purge. Light cutting through and absorbing the darkness. A giant ball of pure, white light. If I understand the concept behind the Patronus itself, it'll cause severe pain or outright death to the Dementors. That includes those Altered bastards.'*

'How giant are we talking here?'

*'Bigger than Azkaban Island is now.'*

Harry sucked in a breath. *'Are you sure the Patronus Armor will protect us?'*

*'It should. We'll **be** light, after all. ...Think of it as changing our entire body into a ball of light if you'd want. Essentially, that's what's going to happen. That or the power will invert when we try and as a result we'll shatter our magical core, unchain all **my** wild magic, and bring death to everything in a mile radius.'*

*'**What?!'***

*'Relax. We aren't going to try anything until we've perfected the Armor. Trying it would just be insane, even someone like me knows that. Our light must be pure if we're to walk through darkness itself and come out unharmed.'*

*'So how the hell would we practice?'*

*'Smaller bursts of energy. We'll build, we'll see how large we can get it. When we hit any form of major resistant, we'll stop. We'll have to build it slowly. If we were to try for the maximum sphere, who knows what the hell might happen. For all we know, the negative energy absorbed by the light would be channeled into our own body. And when talking about things that devour souls, you get into dangerous territory. Two souls were never meant to occupy one body.'*

*'So how do we deal with it once we invoke the spell?!'*

*'Look, this is all based off theory. We'll cross that road when we get to it. We are talking about the finished product here. Chances are, if we become strong enough to invoke the thing's full power, we won't have to worry about what happens - it'll come to us.'*

*'Okay, okay. You're right. No sense thinking that far ahead. One step at a time.'*

*'Then let's embrace the light.'* Purred the voice. *'I'll be coming forward to assist, if that's alright. I promise I won't try to gain control. This time.'*

*'You're so thoughtful.'* Harry said, scowling. *'Right, help me mold this thing. Here's to hoping, eh?'*

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Back downstairs, the adults had filed out of the living room, chasing after Dumbledore to try and get more to the story that had unfolded in front of them. This left Harry's friends sitting around wondering just what in the hell they had witnessed.

"Wonder what got into him." Hermione said, leaning against the back of the couch now. "I don't think I've ever seen Harry like that."

"He's a focused man. His goals are different from the old man's." Malfoy said. "He's clearly irritated with how Dumbledore is doing things."

"Yes, but... to talk to him like that..." Hermione said, chewing at her lower lip slightly.

"If annoying Dumbledore was an expellable offense, we would have been kicked out our first year." Fred said, grinning crookedly.

"Ah, the good old days." George added, looking wistful.

"I should probably go up and see how he's doing." Tonks said, rubbing at her temples. "Think I should?"

"I think it would do the idiot better than sitting up there on his own." Pansy stated.

"Hopefully he's in a bit less snarky mood." Tonks muttered, getting to her feet.

"How are you going to get in, anyway?" George asked.

"Yeah, you gonna go find Gin and see if she can open-sesame the door?" Fred asked.

"Boris is with me!" Tonks said, tugging the sleeve of her shirt up a bit. Boris was lazily curled around the girl's upper arm.

Just then, a shock wave rippled through the house. Moments later, books flew off their shelves, the furniture began to rattle, and an ungodly scream echoed from upstairs. Everyone in the living room froze to the spot. Tonks and Pansy exchanged a glance and were the first to bolt from the room, getting to the stairs just as the swarm of adults began to spill out of the kitchen.

"What the hell was that?" Kingsley asked as the Weasley twins flew by.

"Probably Harry!" Called Fred.

"You know him! Always getting into wacky hijinks!" George added.

Tonks got to the bedroom door first. "Okay, Boris, open it up! Hurry!"

Boris hissed for what seemed like a minute before the door clicked open. By that time, the everyone in the house had gathered in the hallway behind her. She cracked the door open a little at first, just to make sure nothing would fly out at her. Once she saw what was happening inside, however, she threw it open and rushed in.

**"HARRY!"**

Everything in the room was off the ground, hovering a few inches above the floor. Harry stood next to the bed, his body glowing silver. He looked planted to the spot, as though moving would cause him to dissolve into ash. His eyes were solid green, as was his mouth, which was still open from the scream he had let out. He seemed to also be made of static, as he kept flickering in and out every few seconds.

"Let me in." Said a voice from somewhere in the hall.

Dumbledore made his way into the room, gently moving Tonks behind him as he got between the group and Harry. "Harry, can you hear me?"

Harry's head turned, letting out a crackling hiss as it moved, as he looked towards the headmaster. For a moment, the glow began to fade. But then, just as suddenly, the glow became stable, and all the objects in the room lowered back to the floor. He stopped fading and

even began to move, turning to face the headmaster properly. His eyes closed then, and he extended his arms out to the side. As he did, the glow seemed to begin leaving his body, moving towards his hands. Once it was all located in his hands, his eyes opened once more. As they did, the glow vanished entirely. He let out a long breath, one that was accompanied by a green mist.

"Sorry. Took a bit of doing to get that under control." Harry said, his voice sounding hoarse.

"What on earth were you doing?" Tonks asked, rushing over. "And what happened to your eyes and hair?"

"What?" Harry said. Frowning, he stepped into the bathroom for a moment to look into the mirror. He found his reflection to be a bit different than he remembered, as his hair and eyes were both an ashen grey color now.

'**Explain!**' He yelled mentally.

'*Side effect, I guess!*' Replied the creature.

Scowling, Harry took a moment to try and readjust the color of his hair and eyes. But it was no use. Whatever his attempt at invoking the Patronus Armor had done, it had screwed up his Metamorphmagus abilities. At least the ones that governed his hair and eye color. Heading back out of the bathroom, he shrugged. "Side effect."

"Yeah, but what were you *doing*?" Tonks asked again.

"Secret weapon." Harry said, grinning. Glancing over at Dumbledore, his eyes narrowed slightly as he continued, "We told you we had a potential one to fight the Altered, didn't we?"

"And I would guess that you have no intention of telling me what it is?" Asked Dumbledore.

"You're welcome to try and guess. Can't be that hard to figure out." Harry said, heading to the bed and throwing himself back on it. "We'd imagine we're going to get a letter from the Ministry for that."

Someone forward it to us when it comes in. We can write to Scrimgeour directly when it does. He'll grant us a full pardon if we tell him what it was."

Malfoy snorted as he slipped into the room. "You have the new Minister in your pocket, Potter?"

"We see eye to eye is all." Harry said, grinning. "He'll understand. Better than *some* people standing around, I'd reckon."

Dumbledore's gaze was blank, but Harry thought he picked up a faint hint of tension when he spoke next. "Whatever you're doing - be careful. As it would seem you are trying to create a spell of your own, you need to know the dangers behind it."

"This isn't the spell we're trying to create. This is the spell we're going to use so the spell we *are* trying to create won't backfire and kill everything in a mile radius if the power inverts."

The twins let out a low whistle.

"That's very risky, Harry." Dumbledore said.

"We're up against unknown enemies that can't be hurt through any conventional means. We're merely trying to find a way to touch the untouchable." Harry replied.

"Are you sure you know what you are doing?" Dumbledore asked.

"We're pretty sure it's the right method to take." Harry said, a strange, very faint echo finally rising in his voice. "We'll just have to proceed at the correct pace and train hard in order to harness its power. Then Azkaban can be taken."

"Azkaban can be taken?" Repeated Pansy. "What, you're planning to build to a full-scale assault on the place?"

"We are." Harry said, grinning as he looked over. Traces of his real eye color were breaking through the grey. As he spoke, the emerald green bled through further. "When the Armor is perfected, the Altered cannot touch us. When the Purification can be unleashed, we will

render the Dementors extinct. When our light has become brightest, Tom won't be able to touch us. We will invade the island, steal the Soul of Balthazar, and destroy the Orb of Daedelus so that the island comes crashing back to the planet where it belongs!"

"We'? Harry, are you feeling alright?" Tonks asked. "You've been using plural pronouns for awhile."

"Perfectly fine." Harry said, sitting up again. "Why?"

Malfoy walked over, leaning over and peering at Harry, who blinked at the Slytherin.

"What are you-- *HEY!*" Harry cried as Malfoy shoved him back down, pushing his wand up under Harry's chin.

"I know you're tired." Malfoy said, his voice rigid. "But gain dominance again. You're slipping, Potter. Whatever he's telling you, I think you should ignore it and carve your *own* path to victory."

"We have no idea what you mean." Harry said, eyes glancing down at the wand. "We've simply reached an agreement. When we're training, I'm allowed a bit of freedom. Until we finally merge back together, it's going to be something you people will need to get used to. We're two seperate beings operating out of one body. Get off of me, Draco."

"How can the rest of us be sure you won't fly out of control?" Malfoy asked, not budging an inch.

"Because we need to merge before the Gauntlet is reforged. Otherwise *I* will be shackled down and *he* will suffer because of it!" Growled Harry, the echo in his voice growing. "We were never intended to be split apart like this! But until he can overcome his self-imposed ignoring of the situation, it cannot be fixed. He's trusting me for now. I don't know how long this will last."

"Um. Can someone please tell the rest of us just what in the world is going on?" Hermione asked.

Malfoy stood his ground a few more seconds before pushing himself away and pocketing his wand again. He extended a hand, which



Harry took. Helping the Ravenclaw to his feet, Malfoy looked over at Hermione and said, "Potter's got himself a bit of a double identity crisis going on. What he did at the Ministry, what he did at his relatives' house... that was something else. From what he's told me, it's more or less the personification of his wild magic. And until Potter accepts that a part of him enjoys exacting revenge, they'll remain separate beings. *This* is not Harry Potter. This is the other one."

Harry bowed, his eye color almost fully back to normal. Little fracture-like green lines extended out from his iris. "Well, it's certainly nice being able to get this out in the open. Good day, everyone. Given how exhausting this training is going to be, we're probably going to be alternating personalities regularly!"

"All you need is two more. Then you'd have a Harry for every season." Fred commented.

"Ooh, does this mean we get to think of a name for this guy?" George asked.

"It very well could!" Fred said.

Harry gave them a withering glare. "The two of us aren't *that* different. In fact, that's the problem. He just needs to get over it. It should be obvious who's 'in charge,' so to speak, at any given moment. I won't lie - we're going to need to focus a lot of our time on training this year. It's going to leave us tired."

"So what happens? One of you just goes dormant to regain your strength while the other comes forward?" Hermione asked, sounding highly interested in this new oddity.

"Something like that. He switched off to me just after we left the bathroom. I wonder why the Armor affected our hair and eye color..." Harry pondered, frowning thoughtfully. "...Well, in any case - that's where we stand. Your student-side leader of this war is a guy with twin personalities, both of which are focused solely on taking that damned island out of the sky as soon as possible."

"I suppose it is asking too much if I were to request to be present during these training sessions?" Dumbledore asked.

"We aren't very happy with you." Harry said, affixing the headmaster with a faint glare. "But we know the dangers of this training. We will allow you access if time permits you to be there on two conditions. The first being that the Pit get its guardian as soon as possible once we return to Hogwarts. The second being that we will probably train more times than you will be able to attend."

"I dislike the thought of a potential catastrophe engulfing my school." Dumbledore stated.

"And we dislike the thought of you sending off people to die. People don't always get what they want, do they?" Harry asked, a grin splitting his face. "We won't be ready for the first attack, sadly. We still need practice. But once we get the Armor stable, you won't be able to send anyone out after the Altered without us joining the fray."

"I cannot allow that to happen." Dumbledore stated.

"You cannot stop us!" Harry yelled. "We can get through your barriers!"

"But that's impossible." Hermione said. "No one can apparate in or out of Hogwarts grounds."

"We're well aware of that." Harry said, his tone more polite again. "However, think about this - house elves get around the school just fine. Why? Because wizards don't think to disallow it because of the nature of house elves. In other words, the barriers don't cover every potential form of teleportation. I take it everyone felt the shock wave that was sent out? That was... an unexpected side effect of engaging the spell for the first time."

"What do you mean?" Asked Tonks.

"We started on the other side of the bed." Harry said, glancing over his shoulder. "We were over on this side when you entered. We did not *walk* there. Not sure how, but I'll be thinking the matter over after I go back in to hibernate next. But if I'm right - and I usually am, for better or for worse - then we will be able to break free of Hogwarts' barriers if the need arises."

"I will stop you from leaving." Dumbledore stated, that hard edge back to his voice.

Harry cocked his head to one side as he looked at the old man. Turning, he walked over to the headmaster. The green lines in his eyes spreading further towards the edges, he growled, "We'd love to see you *try*. We're younger, we're faster, and we're stronger than you."

"It would seem to me," Dumbledore began, "that I have, in the last few months, knocked you out twice. Your track record versus me is not what one would call impressive, Harry."

"Is that a challenge, old man? You haven't seen what we can truly do. Don't try to act like one of the reasons you originally wanted us to get the Gauntlet wasn't so you could effectively put a limiter on our power. We know your desire to remain as the 'leader' of the 'good guys' but your days are numbered, Albus Dumbledore. Be it from Voldemort's side or from me directly, someone will knock you in your place. If you'd like to make an official duel request, however... well... it's your life." Harry murmured, smiling darkly as he stepped away.

"I am not the type to duel with my students." Dumbledore said.

"You know you'd lose." Harry corrected, walking off.

"You would not be able to--"

Dumbledore never got a chance to finish his sentence. Harry had suddenly started to glow again. A moment later, the headmaster found himself sitting squarely on his backside, looking up at Harry, who was still facing away from him. Both of Harry's wands were spinning wildly in the air on either side of his body.

"I would not be able to **what?**" Harry whispered.

"Harry!" Lupin cried, moving into the room. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Asserting dominance." Harry growled, reaching up to pluck his wands from the air. "He's taking too long. He's using the wrong

methods. He's completely incompetent and yet all of you follow him like lost puppies, unable to think for yourselves!"

Turning around, the group that was gathered could see that Harry's eyes were almost completely green again. "He's not fit to be our leader. He's not fit to command anyone."

"And you *are*?!" Lupin asked, glaring across the room.

"We can stop the Altered. We can put an end to this war. He cannot." Harry hissed. "He will sit back and send others to their deaths, all for the sake of his twisted sense of justice. We're dealing with unknown magic he's never heard of. We're advancing instead of growing stagnant. We'll knock Azkaban out of the sky, we'll render the Dementors extinct, we'll make Voldemort suffer for his sins. And if Albus Dumbledore thinks he can stand in our way, then we'll twist *him* out of reality as well!"

"You would not be able to beat me, Harry. I think we all know that." Dumbledore said, getting up.

"Says the man who just got knocked to the ground." Harry said, smirking.

"He obviously wasn't thinking you'd outright attack him!" Came Mrs. Weasley's voice from somewhere in the group that was still in the hallway.

"Our dear leader, being caught off-guard by a mere student at his school?" Harry asked, closing his eyes. "It doesn't say much for him, does it?"

"You wouldn't be able to stand up to him on even ground, Harry." Lupin said. "He may not always do the right things, but he *is* strong."

Harry opened his eyes and stared into Dumbledore's. The green light had left them entirely. "I'd not only be able to stand up to him, I'd have to hold my punches to keep from rending him completely. I don't think any of you quite understand what I'm keeping chained up most of the time. I don't think any of you realize just how out of control my wild magic has become since Sirius died. Whatever triggered down there

that day, I've had to expend a large amount of my energy to keep it from overflowing. I have no doubt that I'll be able to perfect this spell. I also have no doubt that it won't take very long to do so. I have more than enough magic to completely raze Voldemort's precious Citadel. It's all a matter of control, however. I don't have full control over it. Even when the other me is cooperating, we can't wield this power completely. He's as baffled by it as I am. It's why you felt the shock wave. It's why we were unstable when you entered. It's why I am one hundred percent sure that I could kill Dumbledore before he ever got a chance to blink. If I were to completely just shut all of my occlumency barriers off right now, this house would be flattened."

"You're basically calling yourself a danger to both yourself and everyone around you." Lupin said. "You know that, right?"

"Weapons are often unstable. No telling when one will misfire or explode." Harry said, a grim tone to his voice. "Dumbledore has done well in attempting to raise me as his trump card. But he forgot one very important thing."

"That being?" Asked Dumbledore.

"I'm Harry Potter."

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"*Dear Minister,*

*I'm sure word has reached you that I've performed underaged magic outside of the set boundaries. If you'll refer back to the discussion we had on my visit to the Ministry, you'll have an idea of what was going on. I've gotten the weapon to activate, Minister. But I'm going to need leeway on when and where I can practice. We're at war. All wizards across the country should be allowed use of their magic at all times in situations like this. I know this would mean more work for the men and women at the Ministry, but if you're as good to your word as I hope you are, you've already cleaned out a few of the cobwebs, so to speak. I hope you will allow me this small bit of rule-breaking. In the long run, it could save countless lives. If you don't believe me, ask Albus. I knocked our dear pacifistic headmaster on his royal rump earlier. And I never had to lift a finger.*

*I'll hope for a reply soon. My friend's mother won't shut up until it arrives.*

*Signed, Harry Potter."*

Rufus Scrimgeour smirked as he finished reading Harry's letter. It had arrived a few minutes ago. He had been expecting one. The boys downstairs had informed him of a severe energy spike, one that had sent a third of their monitoring devices completely haywire. Even as the letter to Harry was being written, Scrimgeour knew what had to have happened. Whatever the boy was working on, Scrimgeour wanted to see it.

He also wanted to know what had transpired between Harry and Dumbledore. Scrimgeour had had the pleasure of knowing Dumbledore a good many years, and he knew of the old man's strength. If Harry had been able to knock Dumbledore to the ground, something interesting must have taken place.

As he walked back to his office, Scrimgeour let out a gruff laugh. Voldemort's attacks were set to happen any time now, and the boy was already pushing himself. Whether Dumbledore wanted to believe it or not, Scrimgeour knew that Harry must have already taken a mindset to get his spell working as fast as possible. The boy didn't want anyone to die by the Dark Lord's hands any more than anyone else did. The difference between Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore was that Harry at least had the decency to acknowledge that not everyone could be saved. Scrimgeour knew this for a fact due to his many years with the Aurors. Sometimes you couldn't save everyone. Sometimes you had to force yourself to remain motionless, knowing full well the consequences of your actions.

Closing the door behind him as he entered, Scrimgeour walked over to his desk. Sitting down, he pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and grabbed his quill. After pausing a few minutes to think of what to say, he decided to be simple. From all he had seen, Harry Potter thought along the same frequency as he did. People like them simply knew things. He decided to keep the message short and to the point.

"I'll grant you full use of your magic whenever it's needed. Good luck in your work. And when you succeed in your ventures, let me know. If

Albus won't see to your needs, I will. The sooner Voldemort is stopped, the better. From one man who has seen death far too much to another, I promise we'll pay the bastard back in spades."

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**Author's Notes:** This was definitely not the chapter I had in mind. Originally, I would have had Dumbledore explain his past to Harry, who would get an idea that yes, Dumbledore HAS, in fact, lost people close to him. But then I figured... nah. Too close to canon. I'm trying to distance myself from that now, after all. For the first few books, there wasn't too much I could get away with. But now that Harry's finally tapped into his full potential, he's decided to break free of Dumbledore's gravitational pull, so to speak. Losing his family was the last straw. He decided that day, as he sat on the stairs and waited for the Order to arrive fashionably late, that he would never follow Dumbledore again.

So Harry has become an unstable magician with split personalities and the potential to annihilate a mile of territory is his brilliant scheme backfires on him. I think that ramps up the tension a bit, don't you? And both his personalities hate Dumbledore. There are big things planned for this book. I promise we'll finally get back to Hogwarts next chapter. This chapter was when they SHOULD have returned, but that would make it ludicrously big. And the longer the chapter, the longer it'd take my slacker ass to actually upload the thing. So next time, back to Hogwarts. We've set the tone for the book, now it's time to move forward, close some side plots, make some new ones, and remove a few characters from the running.

Oh yes. There will be death.

## Chapter 8 – Legacy

"Mummy, pleeeeeease? It's not dark yet!" Pleaded the young girl, pointing off towards the still setting sun.

Her mother, standing near the front door of their house, crossed her arms. "No, Annie, you need to come in now. It's almost time to eat!"

Running up to her mother, Annie pouted. "'Almost!' It isn't done yet! It won't take me that long to come in and wash up. Please?"

"You'll have plenty of time to play this weekend, Annie. Besides, it's getting cold out here." Said the girl's mother, putting a hand on her daughter's shoulder to try and wheel her into the house.

"It is?" Asked the girl, waving her arms around a little. It didn't feel cold to *her*, and she was wearing a dress. "It feels warm to me still..."

"Oh, now stop that. It's nearly freezing out here!" Said the mother, holding her arm out for her daughter to feel. The little girl pressed a hand to her mother's arm, eyebrows raising.

"Are you sure the air conditioner isn't broken?" Asked the girl, eyeballing her mother suspiciously.

"I'm sure. Now come on. If I don't get back in there, the pasta will cook too long. And then it'll be all soggy. Remember what happened the last time we wound up with soggy pasta?" Asked the mother.

The girl screwed up her face as the memory returned to her.

"Exactly." Said the mother.

"Well... alright." Said Annie. "I still don't know why you think it's cold out, though."

"It's very simple." Said a quiet voice.

Mother and daughter spun around. On the sidewalk in front of their house was a cloaked figure. The two looked at one another. Neither



had seem him approach. The girl stepped behind her mother, ready to open the door just in case this was one of *those* people her mother had told her about.

"Who are you? And what are you talking about?" Asked the mother, trying to keep her tone light.

"The cold. You feel it because you're scared. It's only natural." Said the cloaked figure, turning slightly. "The bogeyman is prowling the streets tonight. It doesn't matter if you're inside or out. He'll find his way in. And how will you protect your pretty little daughter then?"

"Is that a threat?" Asked the mother, her tone outwardly hostile now. Then, quietly, she added, "Get inside, Annie."

The girl did as she was told, hurrying back into the house and closing the door behind her.

"Oh, now why did you do that?" Asked the man. "Now she'll die all alone."

"You can't scare me." Said the mother. "You aren't the first creep who's thought he could go about our neighborhood, scaring people! You people go around acting intimidating, but you're all nothing more than stupid kids! Show me your face! Go on, be a man!"

"Would you really like to see my face?" Purred the man. "Do you really? I have no problem with showing you. But I do warn you. Most find my appearance... unpleasant."

"I'm sure I've seen worse." Said the mother.

"Oh? I wouldn't be so sure."

"I used to be a nurse. I've seen a lot of things."

"Ahh. I'm sure you have, then. But I'm positive you've never seen someone like... me... before." Said the man, bringing his hands up to pull the hood of his cloak back.

The woman recoiled at the sight of the man. His skin was unnaturally pale, he didn't seem to have much of a nose at all, and his eyes were a sickly color. At the same time she began to recover, a horrible scream echoed from her house. She spun around, instinctively grabbing at the door knob. But before she could turn it to fling the door open, she had been grabbed from behind.

"Are you sure you want to see what's happening in there?" Whispered the man. "Are you really sure? I know what's happening. Would you like me to tell you?"

"Let me go!" Shrieked the woman, struggling against the man's grasp. But he held strong, keeping her firmly in place. He was stronger than he looked.

As the volume of the screams increased, the man began to chuckle quietly. "My children are eating. And your daughter, your precious little girl... she is their first true taste of flesh. Her meat will fill their bellies, her blood will slake their thirst, and the sound of her dying wails will make them yearn for more. Don't be too hasty, you filthy Mudblood. You will have your turn with them. They are starving, after all. I must ensure that they enjoy their first meal. I must ensure they all have enough to eat. And that will be a big undertaking... as I have many, many children."

The woman, sobbing as she continued to try and break free of the man's grip, suddenly felt as though she had been plunged into a tub of ice water. She stopped moving. A cold breath was falling against her neck. It was coming on the wrong side. The man was still looming over her right shoulder. Not wanting to, she found herself almost compelled to look.

It was the woman's screams, rather than her daughter's, that nearly caused a man almost a quarter of a mile away to take action. His partner shook her head, indicating that he had to stay still and remain quiet. He turned to argue, but found her eyes to be shimmering under the faint light of the moon. Gritting his teeth, he merely nodded and turned back to the scene unfolding a few neighborhoods over.

"Do you think Harry can keep this from happening again?" Asked the man, his voice tense.

"I hope so." Whispered the woman. "These people don't deserve this..."

"No one does." Said the man.

Another pair of eyes, unrelated to what was unfolding on the street level, were watching from a different vantage point. These two, like the other pair, were located a fair distance away. They were also having to fight every instinct they had, telling them that they needed to get in there and stop this. But both of them knew - they would stand no chance.

The streets below had been almost flooded in a sea of black creatures, spanning several city blocks. They all stood, motionless, swaying only slightly in the warm breeze that was accompanying the sunset. It looked as if they were awaiting an order.

"I hate this." Growled one of the two, his gruff voice tearing through the silence.

"I don't like it any more than you." Said the other. "But what can we do?"

"I *know* that, damn it! I know that... but to expect us to just sit here on our arses, not doing a blasted thing!"

"They'll be stopped eventually. We just have to believe."

"Believe. In a boy who's mentally unstable! It's a tall order to fill."

Sighing, the second man rubbed his temples. "You heard what he did, Adams. The boys back at the monitoring station still haven't gotten their gear up and running again. Whatever he's doing, he's serious about it. We just have to trust that he'll come through. Because if he can't, we're all screwed."

The first man, Adams, leaned back against the chimney of the large house they were stationed on. "If he can't, and we have to watch this shit unfold more than this one time, I'll personally hunt him down and make him suffer through all the hell those poor people are having to experience. You may believe in him, Maxwell, but I *don't*."

"Believe or not, all we can do is wait." Said Maxwell.

"Yeah. Wait and watch a slaughter." Adams stated, turning back to the carnage unfolding. "Hey... Hey, look! What the hell's going on? They're moving!"

"Oh god. The order to mobilize must have been given." Maxwell said, crouching down and pulling out an enchanted looking glass. "Hope you skipped dinner tonight, Adams."

"Dinner, lunch, breakfast... most of yesterday's meals... probably all of tomorrow's." Adams growled, pulling out his own looking glass. "This is gonna be a long damned night."

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Harry's eyes opened slowly. For a moment, his brain forced him to take in his surroundings. He was in his bed at Number Twelve. Tonks was on her side next to him, curled up into a ball. The covers had been tugged off of him at some point during the night. He was safe. He was... safe.

He sat up and blinked owlshly, eyes not focused on anything. Reaching for his glasses, he quietly slipped out of bed. He looked at the bathroom for a moment, as though he had been expecting to wind up there. Which, if he were to be honest with himself, he had. Turning, he walked to the dresser and quietly pulled out a shirt to put on. He then made his way to the door, gently turned the knob, and slipped out.

Voldemort had made a very clear statement. One directed at him. The Altered had struck as one. Why had they not struck an orphanage? Why had they attacked seemingly at random?

It didn't matter. The innocent were dead. It didn't matter who they were. They didn't deserve the fate that had befallen them. That was all that mattered. Their bodies also hadn't deserved what Voldemort had done with them afterwards. Compiling the remains of everyone who had been fed to the Altered during the attack, Voldemort spelled out a clear message in organs, limbs, and blood.

He had wished Harry a late happy birthday.

Walking down the stairs, it felt as though his legs were made of lead. He was on auto-pilot at this point. Nothing really made sense to him anymore. Before, he thought he had had an idea of what was really going on. He thought he knew how to fix it. Now, though? He wasn't so sure. He had dimly been aware during the nightmarish scene that had unfolded that no one jumped in to play the hero. Harry had won the argument, apparently, yet he couldn't have been more miserable about it.

Pushing open the door to the kitchen, he found many Order members standing around. Most of them looked angry or impatient. Dumbledore was seated at the far end of the table. He got up as Harry looked at him.

"It's over." Harry said, simply. His voice didn't sound quite right.

"I know." Dumbledore said, walking over.

"Were our people out there? Have they gotten back safely?" Harry asked, staring forward still despite the headmaster's approach.

"Our team has returned, as has the Minister's. They briefed us on all that happened. I take it he wanted you to see as well?" Dumbledore asked.

"Wonder why he didn't strike *on* my birthday. Or why he didn't attack any orphanages."

"Why Voldemort does anything is a mystery to us all." Dumbledore said. "Harry - look at me."

Harry raised his head to look up at the headmaster.

"You need to let him go." Dumbledore stated, putting his hands on Harry's shoulders.

"It would be dangerous." Harry said.

"Yes, but you cannot force him out like this. He deserves the right to yell and cry and be angry. Do not chain him up like he wishes to do to you." Dumbledore said, his voice gentle.

Solid green eyes blinking slowly, Harry had to look down again. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you remain so kind to us?"

"Because you are young, confused, and have been tasked with something no one your age should ever have to deal with. You may think that you and I have followed similar paths, with my fighting Grindewald and your fighting Voldemort. But there is one very important difference, Harry. Gellert Grindelwald was my friend. Indeed, he was more than my friend at one point. But his ambitions were too evil. He wished to rule the world by uniting ancient relics that I have long since destroyed." Dumbledore explained.

"You stopped him before he had a chance to kill anyone." Harry said.

"Not directly. Sometimes, I wonder if it wouldn't have been kinder if he had." Dumbledore said. "My little sister once got between Gellert and I as we dueled. She lost the use of her right arm from the spell he was trying to hit me with. Ariana had a hard life, as she had been assaulted when she was little. Muggle children spotted her using magic. They attacked in an attempt to get her to repeat what she had done. My father tracked them down, nearly killing all three. He was sent to Azkaban, where he died some years later. Ariana's magical ability was uncontrollable after suffering this trauma. She would regularly have violent and uncontrollable magical outbursts. One of these was especially strong. Our mother was killed because Ariana could not control her magic properly anymore.

"This brought a rift between my brother and I. Aberforth wanted to have Ariana committed due to her instability. I refused to allow it. The two of us got in a fight not long after our mother was buried over the matter. As a result, my nose has never been the same and I have had almost no contact with my brother since. But the true tragedy of our fight was that Ariana held herself responsible for everything that

had broken our family apart. She took her own life not long after Aberforth left, leaving a note saying that she was sorry for ruining things; that she did not want to be a burden to me anymore."

Harry stared at the headmaster as he told his story. Why the hell did he know none of this before now? Surely the information was out there somewhere. So why...?

Removing his spectacles long enough to wipe at the corners of his eyes, Dumbledore smiled sadly down at Harry. As he put his glasses back on, he continued, "The reason I remain so kind to you is because I am selfish. Your own wild magic is becoming as unchained as my sister's was. And I would do anything in this world to prevent that fate from befalling another person. I believe in you, Harry. And you will not be able to drive this old man away. I assure you - Voldemort will be stopped. But we need to work together to do it. We cannot form a rift to split our number. We are all one big family, allied against a common enemy. And I will not allow *this* family to be broken like my own was."

Harry tilted his head slightly, the green light filling his eyes almost pulsing faintly. Before the color began to fade, allowing Harry's eyes to return to normal, he murmured, "I'm sorry."

"You do not have to apologize." Said Dumbledore. "All you need to do is understand. That is all I ask."

As the creature's presence fell back, allowing Harry himself to rise to the surface once more, Dumbledore prepared himself. He couldn't be sure of the real Harry's mental status at the moment. He wasn't sure if this Harry had heard everything he had said to the other one or not. It became clear quite fast that he had, in fact, heard everything. No matter how weak or strong the warrior, everyone had a point at which they needed to let go.

Harry looked up at Dumbledore blankly for a moment. Blinking a few times as tears began to spill from his eyes, he smiled weakly.

"Don't tell anyone. I don't cry."

Smiling, Dumbledore pulled Harry into an embrace to allow the boy a much-needed breakdown. Though many innocent lives had been unjustly snuffed out that night, it had brought about one very important turning point. The two had connected again. He wasn't sure how long Harry had built up such spite for him, but perhaps now he could understand, at least to a degree, why he, Dumbledore, acted the way he did.

"Your secret is safe with us, Harry." Dumbledore said.

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Days ticked by slowly after that. Scrimgeour, working in conjunction with the Order, had ordered the Prophet to report on the Altered attacks at once to get word out to everyone. Given were strict instructions on what to do if an attack was occurring nearby. Namely, to get out of there by any means necessary. The Altered were still invincible, despite Harry trying to advance his new spell. It seemed as though the initial burst was the easy part. He had gotten almost nowhere since. School was starting in two days. Harry still wasn't sure what he was going to do.

Obviously, summoning a guardian for the Pit was important. Finding Solieyu and finding out where the hell he'd gotten off to was, as well. Harry still hadn't heard from his vampiric friend and he had long since gotten worried. Dumbledore assured him that the Reinhardts were safe and sound, though. His training still needed to advance as quickly as possible. Another attack hadn't yet occurred, but that was hardly the point. His studies were the last thing he wanted to think about.

One day, as he sat around rubbing the Eye of Caspar and thinking about what the hell he was going to be doing that year at Hogwarts, a knock came at the door. Standing, Harry headed over and opened it. Outside was Remus Lupin, holding a medium-sized box.

"Can I come in?" He asked.

"Sure. What's with the box?" Harry asked, stepping aside to allow the man in.



Lupin walked over to the bed and sat, patting the space next to him as he looked over at Harry. "Something I've been trying for awhile now to procure. This, Harry, is what Sirius left to you."

Harry felt almost as though someone had punched the wind out of him. "What he left to me..." He repeated eventually.

"Yes. With lives such as ours, it's always good to have a will written early. One can never be too careful." Lupin said, glancing back at the box in his hands, a sad smile on his face. "He left a lot to others, of course. You may think it to be a bit small, but I know exactly what's inside. I think you'll like what's there. Most is just stuff he'd intended to give you for your birthday or on Christmas. There are one or two things, however..."

Harry closed his door and walked over, sitting next to Lupin, who handed him the box. Once he had, he reached into his robes to pull out a sealed letter, which he also handed to Harry.

"I know the contents of the box. Not the letter. Before Scrimgeour took the helm, it was a tooth and nail fight just to get ahold of these things. The new Minister is a good man. Far better than Fudge could have ever hoped to be. The only reason it's taken this long is because he's been swamped with other work. Which is certainly understandable. I'm just glad he's on our side." Lupin said.

As Harry opened the envelope, he asked, "What did he leave to you? If you don't mind me asking, I mean."

"The better part of the Black Family vaults." Lupin said, his tone bitter. "I told him over and over not to do that. But he was always worried about my wellbeing. I never wanted his damn money. If I could, I'd throw it all away just to have him back. In addition, probably because he knew I'd be mad about the money, he decided to leave *me* his motorcycle. I don't know what Sirius did to that damn thing to this day, but I swear he somehow brought it to life."

Harry nodded, pulling his letter out and flipping it open. After scanning the single page, he closed his eyes and sighed. Sirius had apologized for being gone, promised to watch over him in some way, and in an

unmistakably Sirius Black way had told him to give Voldemort what he had coming to him.

Setting the letter to one side, Harry pulled the flaps of the box open. There was something large and deep blue. But on top of it was a locket. Harry's brow creased as he set the box next to him, picking the locket up to inspect it. "Moony? Isn't this a bit... girly?"

Lupin laughed. "Sirius used to wear a dozen bracelets around Hogwarts. Mostly to irritate the teachers. They'd make the worst noises possible. His motto was if it looked good, wear it. And I'm sure he had some sort of deeper meaning behind this. I wish we could have heard what it was. Is there anything inside?"

"Nope." Harry said, popping it open. He frowned then. "...But I have an idea what I could put in."

"Oh? Feel like telling?" Lupin asked.

"I can't be sure yet, as I don't know if it would fit. I may put that shard of the Philosopher's Stone in here, though..." Harry said. "Maybe having it around will help me think of a way to restore it."

"I'd spell it up tight if you did that, then." Lupin said cautiously. "It may not be much, but a shard is still better than nothing at all."

"Oh, I intend to." Harry said, closing the locket and setting it aside. "Now then, what the devil is this?"

'This,' as it turned out, was a cloak bearing the Black Family crest on its back. It was the deep blue thing that the locket had been sitting on. "Oh hello, this is nice... not so sure about the crest, though. *Toujours pur*... 'Always Pure,' huh?"

"It was the Black Family's way." Lupin said, shrugging crookedly. "I can have it changed if you'd like."

"You can?" Harry asked, standing up to see how well the cloak fit. It was a tiny bit longer than he would have preferred, but it would go well with his school robes, if nothing else.

"Sure. Wouldn't take long at all." Lupin said. "Got something in mind?"

"*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*?" Harry suggested.

Lupin looked off for a moment to think. "'I will find a way, or I will make one,' correct?"

"Something like that." Harry said. "A fitting statement for me and my life in general, I think."

"Hannibal, huh?"

"Yeah."

Lupin just chuckled and took the cloak when Harry held it out. "I'll get it back to you before you leave for Hogwarts, alright?"

"Sounds good. Now then, what else is in this box?" Harry asked, sitting back down and grabbing for the box in question.

The only things remaining in the box were a number of thick books. Harry seemed confused at first. Sure, he loved to read, but Sirius had let him have his run of Number Twelve's library already. Had there been books he had missed or something? Reaching in, he pulled out the biggest one. When Lupin got a good look at it, a sort of strangled cry left his throat. Harry looked over, one eyebrow cocked, and asked, "What?"

"Don't look on page 46 if you ever want to think about your parents again!" Lupin said, his voice a bit higher than normal. "Oh god. Sirius, you jackass... of all the things to leave him, was this the best idea?"

"What is it?" Harry asked, looking back down and flipping the book over. The first page told him all he needed to know. The Marauders, all four, in the prime of their youth, stood somewhere on Hogwarts' grounds. A moment later, they whirled around and, in unison, dropped trou. "*GAH!*"

"Yeah." Lupin groaned. "That's uh... it's the place we put all the photos we never wanted to see the light of day. Suffice to say, there's a few pages in there you might regret looking at."

"...Noted. I'll glance through it after Voldemort is taken care of then." Harry said, gingerly setting the photo album down and reaching for a few of the smaller books. "Now then, what are these?"

Lupin tilted his head as Harry flipped one open. "...Well I'll be damned."

"Is this what I think it is, Moony?" Asked Harry as he flipped to a few random pages, quickly scanning their contents.

"I do believe it is. Odd. I never saw Sirius writing in any journals..."

But there they were. At least a dozen old, slightly worn-out journals, all bearing a golden 'S.B.' in the bottom right corner. Harry looked to Lupin and asked, "You wanna look through these before I do?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't. He left them to you." Lupin said.

"Yeah, but I doubt he'd mind." Harry said. "Anyway, I think you're entitled."

"...I'll only look at them after you have. How does that sound?" Lupin suggested.

Harry nodded, setting the journals back into the box. "Sounds good." Grabbing for the photo album to stick it back in the box as well, he asked, "Who else was in the will?"

"Only a few. Sirius didn't make close friends easily. He was outgoing, sure. But he kept himself well-guarded, if that makes any sense." Lupin said.

Picking up the locket, Harry walked over and knelt in front of his trunk. Popping it open, he rummaged for the shard of the Philosopher's Stone he had buried at the bottom. As he felt around, he asked, "Did Tonks or her mum get anything?"

"Oh, of course. He left them the remaining part of his family's fortune as well as a few choice valuables and jewelry. He left Dumbledore an old collection of magical records. I've yet to deliver those. In fact, you're the only person I've gotten around to giving his new belongings to so far. I really should be getting on that." Lupin said, standing.

Finding the piece of the Stone, Harry pulled it out and opened the locket. He had to twist it a bit, but the Stone fit snugly in place inside. Smiling, he popped it closed and quickly muttered all the sealing and locking spells he knew before slipping it on. As he walked with Lupin to the door, he tugged his shirt out to drop the locket down the front of it. The golden locket was cold against his skin, though it did seem to have one tiny warm spot to it.

"Well, thanks for bringing all of this by. It'll give me something to distract myself with so I don't spend the next few days thinking solely about Voldemort." Harry said, opening the door.

"Think nothing of it. I'm just sorry I couldn't get it to you sooner." Lupin said, stepping out into the hallway. As he turned to head off, he waved. "I'll see you the day you leave. I promise. If you hear sudden squealing downstairs later, it'll probably be Andi or her daughter opening what Sirius left to them."

"Andi'?" Harry repeated, grinning. "Hello now..."

"Not a word, young man." Lupin said, grinning as he rounded the top of the steps.

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Before Harry knew it, the usual ritual of packing and heading to King's Cross was over with. In truth, he wasn't looking forward to returning to Hogwarts. He had things to do at the school. Things which would prevent him from working on the things he wanted to work on. His future be damned. If he didn't find a way to put a halt to Voldemort and his Citadel, he - to say nothing of everyone else - would have no future to look forward to experiencing.

Harry and Tonks sat on one side of their compartment, the empty spot next to them a reminder that someone was missing. On the

other side sat Malfoy, Pansy, and Hermione. Ginny and Ron were off in another compartment. Apparently, Ron still took issue with who his sister was dating. Very little talking took place for the first hour of the trip. It wasn't until Luna Lovegood arrived that things got less grim.

"Hello, everyone! How have your summers been?" Asked the blonde, stepping into the compartment and shutting the door behind her.

"Hey." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "About as well as can be expected, considering what's been happening. How about you?"

"We've been alright. Worried about Solieyu, of course." Luna said, sitting next to Tonks.

"You haven't heard from him, either?" Hermione asked.

Luna shook her head. "Unfortunately not. Professor Dumbledore did stop by for tea one day to let me know he and his mother were safe, though. But..."

"But it's hard to believe without seeing him with your own eyes." Harry finished, looking back out the window. "Yeah. Sounds about right. If we don't see him at dinner, I'm going to have to have another talk with the headmaster."

"Don't worry. I'm sure Leon's fine." Tonks said, putting a hand on Luna's shoulder.

The blonde smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. "I know he's alright. He's very strong when he wants to be."

"Can someone fill Luna in on what's happened on our end?" Harry asked. "The other me wants to come out for a bit. Says something feels off."

"The other you?" Luna asked, tilting her head.

"Long story." Tonks muttered. "Yeah, we'll let her know. Go rest, Harry. I'll make sure he gives up control before we hit the school."

Harry let his eyes slip shut for a moment. When they opened, spider-like green lines were once more extending out from the center of them. It was how Harry's other personality had decided to make its dominance known.

"Something felt off?" Malfoy said.

"Yeah." Harry growled, getting to his feet and leaning against the window. "I can feel him. He's close. And he's very, very amused about *something*."

"Voldemort? How close?" Pansy asked.

Harry squinted a little. "I... god damn it. *THAT CLOSE!*" He roared, taking a step back and pointing.

The train had been passing through a small forest that opened up to a view of the sea. There, a few miles out, and visible enough that everyone could see it, was Azkaban. The prison had been twisted into a tall, spiral tower that stood at its center. Its edges had been twisted and extended out to form makeshift castle walls. A place for lookouts to monitor it from all sides. There was very little on the underside of the island, which looked almost dried out now. Whatever the island had been held down by, it had offered no resistance to the place taking to the skies. There were no outward signs of motion, nor a method of how it was keeping airborne.

"He wants me to see it!" Harry hissed, teeth gritted together. "That miserable bastard wants me to see it for myself! He wants me to know exactly what I'm up against! Us seeing the first attack wasn't enough, apparently!"

"Harry, your scar..." Tonks said, grabbing his arm.

Drawing his wand, Harry quickly banished the blood that had been slowly trickling from his forehead. Biting his anger back down, he offered instead a grin. In a calmer voice, he growled, "I'm going to come knocking at your door this year, Tommy. I'll break your new toys and send you crying. If you're lucky. If you're not and I can't get the *Defaeco* mastered by then, then you'll simply be erased from existence."

"Yeah, along with you and everything else within range." Malfoy drawled, raising an eyebrow.

"Enjoy your freedom, Tom." Harry said, stepping close enough to lean his forehead against the window. From the sound of it, the floating island had been spotted by almost everyone around them. "I'll steal it away and make you regret ever having challenged me very soon. Laugh now, because the next time I see you, I'll kill you."

The view of the sea was finally obstructed by more trees just before another tunnel through a mountain. As they passed through the darkness, Harry closed his eyes and blew out a harsh breath through his nose. Riddle was going to suffer endlessly for taunting him.

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By the time arrived at Hogwarts, the other Harry had gone to rest, allowing Harry himself to take control again. Once he had, he had remained quiet. Tonks recognized the look on his face. He was deep in thought. Clearly, the two parts of Harry had conversed somewhere along the way. Eventually, he had let his head tilt back, leaning against the back of the seat. He had started to hum something very quietly, the sound being drowned out by the train clattering down its tracks.

He was the first out of the compartment and the train itself. As Harry walked from the station to the carriages, he had his wands out, both twirling by themselves a few inches from the palms of his hands. He was agitated. If an attack were to happen, he would be ready. He was quite sure that if he really wanted to, he could have blown off one of Hogwarts' towers with the Eximo.

But nothing happened, and the ride to Hogwarts went off as plainly as it ever did. Harry had been calmed by that point, stowing his wands back away. He was still fairly quiet, though. The only times he spoke, he spoke in Parseltongue with Boris, who was curled around Harry's neck. According to Harry, the speed of the blood surging through him was making the snake quite cozy.

When they entered the Great Hall, they began to scan the small crowds that had already started to form. But Solieyu was nowhere to



be found. Biting down on his lower lip, Harry glanced up to the staff table. Dumbledore was sitting at his normal place and almost seemed to be expecting Harry to be angry, as he nodded and offered a smile to the boy, as though to indicate everything was fine. But Harry didn't feel very placated by this gesture. He sat down at the end of the Ravenclaw table and monitored the doors to the Great Hall all through the start of term feast. When Dumbledore had asked the prefects to escort their respective House's students back to their dorms, Solieyu was still absent.

Moments later, Harry was gliding through the corridors of the school, his friends following behind him a safe distance, just in case he decided to explode. But Harry didn't start to yell. He just kept walking the familiar path leading down to the Snake Pit. Once there, he started a quick, but heated discussion with the little snake guarding the door. At the end, after the password was given ("*Fiat lux*") Harry let out a long sigh as he stepped into the Pit's living room.

"Levi's not admitted anyone. Wherever Leon is, he isn't here." Harry said, walking towards the couch and leaning against the back of it and staring into the fire. "Where the hell is he?"

"Dumbledore didn't seem visibly upset by anything. Surely if something had happened..." Hermione began.

"He also made no mention of Azkaban, if you'll recall." Malfoy said, walking around to sit down on the couch. "I'm sure he wants to talk that over with a few people, ourselves included, before addressing the school."

"I swear, if something's happened to that jackass..." Harry muttered, lowering his head.

Tonks walked over, rubbing Harry's back slowly. "Harry, you need to relax. I'm sure Leon's just fine."

"I think he is, too." Luna said, stepping up and leaning over to look at Harry, who turned to face her. "Ever since we stepped into the school, I've felt... comforted. I'm not sure how to describe the feeling other than that. In comparison, I spent most of the train ride worrying."

"Go and sit down, Harry." Pansy said, heading to one of the room's corners, grabbing a book, and doing similar. "If he doesn't show up within the hour, we'll go see the old man."

"...Yeah. Yeah, I guess." Harry said, blowing out another sigh.

"Always amazed at how clean this place is." Tonks said. "Kinda surprised the fire was lit."

"Probably Dobby doing me a-- oh, I am an *idiot*." Harry stated, stopping midway around the side of the couch.

"We know that. Care to elaborate as to why, though?" Malfoy asked, smirking as Harry shot him a dirty look.

"Dobby!" Harry called.

*CRACK*. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir?" Said the eager little house elf, smiling pleasantly up at Harry, who grinned back down at him.

"First, thanks for keeping the Pit in good condition. Second... have you or any of the other house elves seen Leon, Dobby?" Harry asked, kneeling down.

Dobby nodded, his big ears flapping. "Yes, sir! Professor Dumbledore was seeing him and his mother in this afternoon! Does Harry Potter wish to see his friend?"

"Yeah, go fetch the little jerk." Harry said, grinning wider. "This'll teach him to try making a dramatic entrance on us."

Pansy snorted. "No drama unless you're the one causing it, huh?"

"Got that right." Harry said, standing up as Dobby teleported away. A moment later, the house elf reappeared with Solieyu next to him.

Solieyu had gained another inch or two over the summer and looked, if it was possible, even more gaunt than Harry could remember. He was wearing slightly tattered robes that wouldn't have looked out of place in Remus Lupin's wardrobe. His hair was shorter now, just coming down a bit past his shoulderblades. He also looked rather

annoyed at having been summoned. He stood with his legs close together and his arms crossed.

"Leon." Harry said, walking up.

"Harry." Solieyu replied.

"You look like *shit*." Harry declared.

"It's good to see you, too." Solieyu said, blandly.

Harry chuckled and stepped forward. Solieyu closed his eyes and smirked. The two embraced for a moment before Harry stepped back and asked, "What the hell happened to you, man? We were all worried. Especially Luna."

Solieyu turned in time for Luna to catch him in a tight hug. Smiling apologetically, he put an arm around the girl and squeezed back. Turning to look back at Harry, he answered, "It's a bit of a long story. Mother and I have been on the move all summer long."

"Why?" Harry asked, brow creasing. "Did Death Eaters attack near your home?"

"A bit more grave than that, I'm afraid." Solieyu said, glancing off towards the fire. "The vampires have sworn allegiance to Voldemort."

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Author's Notes: Hey kids. Sorry if the chapter is a bit disjointed and brisk at times. There was a lot I wanted to get done. And I wrote it over the course of a couple weeks. It's been a rough month. My grandfather passed away (it was a blessing, really. The cancer on top of his alzheimer's?) the very day an ice storm swept into Oklahoma. For those not in the States or those who just don't watch the news, the whole area was declared a disaster area. My town was out of power for quite awhile. It sucks having no heat in winter, kids. But things are slowly returning to normal. As I write the author's notes here, it's December 18 at almost 2 in the morning. Grandpa died the 9th in the afternoon. The ice storm swept in that night. His funeral that the Wednesday of last week. So... yeah. Tough times.

But I'm doing okay, as is the rest of the family. We're adapting. I've been a little under the weather just from what the ice storm did to me, but that aside, I've been alright. Not great. Not horrible. Just alright.

So here's Year 6 Leon finally. A bit of a change in design as you can see. Taller, more gaunt, shorter hair for the first time. And yes, the vampires have picked a side. More on that in the next chapter. And speaking of the next chapter, you know who else plays a big part there?

Demetra.

I'll see ya then, folks. Expect it in a week or two. I like this two week per chapter schedule. All's I'll say about the chapter is...

Amen.

## Chapter 9 – Amem

There was silence in the room following Solieyu's statement.

Harry was the first to recover, tugging his glasses off for a moment to rub his nose. "Great. Just great. As if we didn't have enough to worry about." Putting his glasses back on, he continued, "So what happened, Leon? Did they come for you, or did you guys go on the run afterwards?"

"They came for me." Solieyu said. "Not long after I'd gotten home for the summer, actually. Two of them, both men I'd never heard of, said that I had 24 hours to make my decision. Well, mother contacted Dumbledore and he got us to safety. But it was never safe for long. He wanted to keep us on the run. It... wasn't hard to understand why."

"Fill the rest of us in, then." Harry said. "Why couldn't you and your mum come to stay at Number Twelve?"

Solieyu glanced away for a moment before sighing and closing his eyes. "Because at the time, I was... as you put it many times last year, out of control. It wasn't hard for the vampires to find us when one house in town would always have a strange amount of women passing by it constantly."

"Ahh." Harry said simply. If Solieyu was going to apologize for his powers running wild, he didn't want to interrupt too much.

"Finally, my mother was the one who made me get my powers under control. She sat me down and, for the first time in a long time, we talked. Really talked. About everything that had been happening, both in school and out. Whatever getting it all out of my system did, it allowed me to see clearly. I had worked out what to do by week's end and after that, we were able to stay at one place the rest of the summer. But owls were being monitored all over the place. It wasn't safe to write." Solieyu explained, shaking his head slowly.

"You could've always asked Dumbledore if you could give him letters. Or send some with Fawkes." Harry suggested.

"I didn't want to be a burden on the man. He was already doing a lot for us and he seemed rather stressed out besides. Probably due to everything that's been happening. I'm sorry, Harry. I heard of what happened when those new Dementors attacked." Solieyu said, glancing back up.

"If Dumbledore was stressed, you can blame at least a part of it on me. I've... we've not felt well this summer. We've been... out of control as well, if you could say that." Harry said, making a face.

"We'?" Solieyu asked.

"You heard about what Potter did to the Death Eaters who attacked his relatives' house, didn't you?" Asked Malfoy.

"Dumbledore spoke of it briefly, yes. You've not been having a very good year, have you?" Solieyu said.

"I've had better." Harry admitted.

"What happened there combined with what happened at the Ministry changed him. Potter's got himself a second personality. The side with control over his wild magic." Malfoy explained. "Long story, mostly complicated. Potter can write it down if you want. Just if you see him with little green lines in his eyes, don't worry too much."

"Noted." Solieyu said, eyebrow raised. "You *have* been busy, haven't you?"

"Unfortunately." Harry said. "So you managed to evade the vampires. They're *all* on his side?"

"Most. There are a few like myself who decided to fight his power. Right now, my mother should be at Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore assured me he would watch over her. It helps put my mind at ease. The vampires would have found us if I had been there as well. I can't help but wonder if that was Voldemort's intention." Solieyu said.

"The important thing is that everyone's safe." Hermione said.

"Agreed." Harry said. "So..."

"So?"

"Say it." Harry said, grinning.

Tonks swatted him on the back. "Don't make him do that!"

"No, no. It's fine." Solieyu said, a faint smile on his face. "I deserve a little teasing. After all I put our group through, apologizing is the least I could do. I *am* sorry, Harry. It was... difficult trying to come to terms with a power such as the one that was out of control. For someone like myself, who is more comfortable alone or with close friends, having so many people - and girls, at that - flocking to me made me... I don't know *what* it made me. But it didn't make me any smarter, judging by how I reacted to it. I didn't know what to do, so I did the only thing I could - I pretended it didn't exist."

"At least you've got it under control now. That's all that matters. And I appreciate the effort, by the way. It's going to be a busy year. I want to bring Azkaban back to Earth before year's end. I need to reassemble and forge the Gauntlet before he gains too many more allies. It's troubling enough that he's already rallied the vampires to his side. I can only imagine what he promised them." Harry said.

"I believe the last of my powers manifested itself over the summer, as well. And as that was purely instinctive rather than something I actively needed to control, nothing bad became of it." Solieyu said. "So... now what do we do?"

"We rest." Harry said, shrugging. "We're all united again and it's going to be a long damned year."

"I was meaning to ask," Pansy said, leaning forward in her chair. "What'd you think about the change of positions on staff?"

"I can't be too mad about Snape finally getting the Defense position. Classes should at least be interesting now. The good news is that that Slughorn guy didn't trigger any of the usual warning sirens in my head. He seems harmless." Harry said, glancing over. "Why, do you feel differently?"

"Nah. Just curious." Pansy said. "I figured you'd be pissed about Snape being the one to teach Defense."

"Better him than Slughorn, I guess." Tonks said. "Can't imagine that guy doing anything relating to combat. Not with as big as he is."

"Right. If everyone's done, let's all go get some sleep, shall we? Draco, Pansy, you two be careful in the dungeons." Harry said.

"The day I can't handle myself is the day I go willingly into Voldemort's service." Malfoy said, getting to his feet.

"We'll be alright. A lot of the Death Eater children didn't bother returning. Those that did are people we know we're tougher than." Pansy chimed in, also standing. "Plus Blaise is on our side, if nothing else."

"I'll have to meet him sometime. I kept meaning to last year, but things just kept coming up. ...I say that knowing full well that this year will be even worse." Harry said, sighing.

"Don't worry about Zabini." Malfoy said. "Let us handle our own inner-House business. You concentrate on that spell of yours."

"I really should say this now, just to get it out in the open." Harry began, glancing around the room. "I'll fill Leon and Luna in on what I'm planning later, but... just so all of you know, we'll be able to add more rooms to the Pit very soon. If any of you would like a place down here, just let me know."

"Thanks, but I'll pass." Malfoy said. "Someone has to lord over the other Slytherins. No one but the idiots on Voldemort's side would dare oppose me."

"And I have to stay to make sure Draco doesn't spray paint the walls in their blood!" Pansy chirped.

"Quiet, woman." Malfoy said, leveling a withering glare at Pansy, who promptly slugged him in the arm. "Ow!"

Smirking, Pansy turned and waved to Harry. "Sweet dreams!"



"You too." Harry said, biting back a grin as Malfoy chased Pansy out of the Pit. "Hermione? You gonna be okay getting back up to Gryffindor Tower?"

"I'll be careful." Hermione said. "Can I borrow this book on the history of alchemy? I promise I'll take good care of it!"

"I don't doubt that. Just don't let the teachers see you with it." Harry said.

Hermione smiled and nodded, tucking the small book into her robes before slipping out of the room. It left Harry and Tonks with Solieyu and Luna.

"You mentioned a plan." Solieyu said.

"We're summoning a Beholder to guard the Pit." Harry said.

Solieyu's eyebrows raised. "A Beholder?! Harry..."

"I know the risks. Dumbledore's gonna be here to oversee the project, though. And... as for the other me, Luna can fill you in on that. Tom decided to let those of us on the train see his new Citadel for ourselves. The other me sensed his presence and wanted to come forward. Not long after, it came into view. I honestly have no idea how I'm going to get into that place and get the Soul of Balthazar out..." Harry said, walking around to sit on the couch. "There's still so much work to do, Leon. I feel like I'm being spread too thin..."

As Tonks walked around the couch to sit next to Harry, Solieyu leaned against its back. "I know how you feel. Whenever you decide to attack, you'd better be counting on me to be there by your side. I let you down once, Harry. That was the last time I plan on letting that happen."

"Thanks." Harry said, closing his eyes. "...Okay, go on, you two. Go off and catch up. We'll still be here in the morning."

"You going to be okay?" Asked Solieyu.

"As good as I ever am these days. The sooner I can get rid of Voldemort, the better off I'll be." Harry said.

Solieyu nodded slowly. "Very well, then. Luna?"

"Shall we head up to the Nest, Solieyu? The moon is very pretty tonight." Luna said, latching onto one of Solieyu's arms and smiling up at him.

"Sure." Solieyu replied, smiling back. "Good night, you two."

"Have fun up there!" Tonks giggled.

"Don't go catching colds on us." Harry drawled.

"I hate you both." Solieyu deadpanned, causing Harry and Tonks to snicker. "Come on, Luna. I'd love to hear what you've been up to this summer."

"Oh, you'll love it!" Luna exclaimed as she and Solieyu headed for the door. "Daddy and I spent a week camped out in the garden waiting for a rare, green gnome variant to creep in! It's only visible on the blackest of nights and if you happen to be growing sweet corn!"

"He's doomed." Harry whispered as the Pit's door closed behind the exiting couple.

"She's good for him." Tonks said. "And vice versa, I think."

"Yeah. And to think he denied being her boyfriend back when they first started getting closer to one another." Harry said, chuckling. "How long until he proposes, do you think?"

"Dunno. He might be wary of it due to his disease." Tonks said, frowning. "I doubt they'd ever be able to have children for fear of passing it along..."

"It's only a fifty percent chance, right? But yeah, he'd probably be too paranoid to allow it to happen. I can't say as I blame him, but it *is* kinda depressing to think about. Still, I think those two'll look together in full wedding attire." Harry said.

"Luna with some ridiculous doohickey on her veil. Leon having to get a custom-made suit because he's too tall and skinny to get one off the racks." Tonks pondered aloud. "How long do you think they'll be up there?"

"Probably all night." Harry said. "We should go up there again sometime. It's been ages."

"Just hafta be sure they aren't there. That's the last thing I wanna walk in on." Tonks stated.

"I dunno, I think it'd be funny. He needs to be embarrassed every so often." Harry said. "It builds character!"

"What about Luna?" Tonks asked.

"Luna would probably just say hi to us and resume business." Harry stated.

Tonks snorted. "Just the same. I could go my whole life without seeing them snogging. Or worse."

"Yeah, agreed. Besides, Leon suffers enough torment as is. Probably not a good idea to put more on him. I'm glad he got his powers under control, though." Harry said.

"So am I." Tonks agreed. "Wanna head to bed, Harry? You look like you're about to nod off there."

Harry groaned. "Heading to bed would require that I heft my lazy arse off this couch. And I just cannot be bothered to do that right now. Besides, the fire is nice."

"*Co-signed.*" Hissed Boris, lazily.

"No sleeping on the couch for you! It's bad for your neck. Besides, what about me? I don't plan to sleep alone on our first night back, you know." Tonks stated.

"...Oh, very well. Infernal women. Boris, want me to leave you out here?" Harry asked.

"Yes, *please. On the arm of the couch. It's pleasantly warm...*" Boris said.

Harry let Boris slither onto his hand before transferring him to the left arm of the couch. As the taipan curled back up, Harry got to his feet with a long groan. "Ugh... I feel like I'm sixty years old."

"Good thing you don't look it. I don't plan to be married to some old man." Tonks said, grabbing Harry by the hands and pulling him towards the bedroom.

"There's a joke there somewhere. Possibly one that'd get me punched. I'm just too tired to find and make it though." Harry whined.

"I could punch you anyway, if you want!" Tonks said.

"I'll pass." Harry said, smirking at the girl. "Alright, alright, I'll hurry it up. C'mon, Nym. Let's get some sleep. It's been a long-ass day."

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Five hours later, Harry found himself sitting upright in bed abruptly as he was snapped awake. He hadn't had dreams like *those* in awhile. The type he had had years back, where it changed from one random scene to another. The only difference was that he had been presented with far more disturbing imagery this time around. He went to take a breath only to find his breathing was ragged.

Leaning forward slightly, he closed his eyes and tried to regain proper control of his breathing. It didn't help much. He glanced up at the door, wishing that Boris had decided to come into the bedroom with them. He could use someone to talk to. He didn't want to wake Tonks up. But Boris regularly was awake at night. Harry wasn't sure what the little taipan ever did, though the answer he got most was "Simply thinking."

Lowering himself back down slowly, Harry stared upwards, eyes unfocused. Eventually, he turned his head to the right. Tonks was on her left side, curled up slightly as per usual. He watched her sleep for a few minutes before looking away. His neck muscles felt tight. No

amount of Occlumency was going to prevent that. Stress was stress, after all. He let out a sigh into the stillness of the night.

"I keep telling you it's okay to wake me up, you know." Came Tonks' quiet voice. "I don't mind. And you know I'll just wake up, anyway."

"I'd still like to know how you trained yourself to do that." Harry murmured. "And sorry. I just... I dunno. My brain isn't firing properly tonight."

Tonks scooted closer so her head was resting on Harry's shoulder. Draping an arm over his chest, she curled her fingers around the other shoulder. "Have a vision?"

"Regular old nightmares this time." Harry said, leaning his head against Tonks'. "The last one was... bad."

"How bad?" Tonks asked.

"Spell backfiring at Hogwarts bad." Harry said.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"...You okay?"

"I won't be okay until Voldemort is dead." Harry said, weariness evident in his voice.

"I wish there was something I could do for you." Tonks whispered, tilting her head slightly.

"You already do more than enough." Harry said. "That you've even managed to stay by my side this whole time..."

"Not the whole time..." Tonks corrected, quietly.

"Wasn't your fault." Harry said. "You know I don't blame you. And Leon's apologized for it now. The point is... thank you, Nym. You have no idea what it means to me for you to just be here for me."

Sometimes I feel like you're the only thing keeping me from slipping away into insanity."

"Don't talk like that. Things will get better, Harry. I know they will."

"Yeah. But they'll get worse first. You know the saying. You know my life. Do you think it won't?"

"Not the point, Harry. Come on. Close your eyes and think about the Yule Ball. Picture what happened that night. Whenever I'm feeling down, I do. Nine times out of ten, it makes me feel better." Tonks whispered.

Harry smiled, despite his feelings. "You looked beautiful that night. I don't know what I would have done if things hadn't gone well."

"Thought up some other overly complicated plan, probably." Tonks said, giggling sleepily. "You have a bad tendency to over complicate things, after all. You need to try working on simpler terms."

"I'm no Gryffindor." Harry muttered. "...Not that I've not acted like one at times."

"Houses are silly, if you ask me. You can't label people like that. Not everyone from our House is smart."

"Terry." Harry said, his voice quiet again.

"Not everyone from Gryffindor is brave."

"Pettigrew."

"Not everyone from Slytherin follows Voldemort. Not everyone from Hufflepuff is cowardly and simple."

Harry had closed his eyes tightly. "Everyone can stray from the path laid out for them if they try hard enough. What they make of their lives after that point is up to them. No one can govern how they live but themselves. Either they decide to be brave and strive forward through the pain or they submit to it and remain where they are forever."

Tonks tilted her head slightly to give Harry's neck a light kiss. "Good people fall and bad people continue living. Life isn't fair. But you can't keep trying to tackle all of its problems by yourself. At least not in such a complicated manner. Focus on one thing at a time. Start from scratch and build to the simplest method of victory. If needed, you can go back and add things."

"When did you get so smart? I seem to remember a scrawny little girl who ran off from home just to annoy her mum being the one who found me." Harry said.

"I've always been smart! And who are you calling scrawny?"

"I'm not saying you are anymore. I still remember hopping your fence and seeing you sunbathing. That was quite the pleasant surprise." Harry said.

"You scared the crap out of me doing that, you know." Tonks stated.

"Sorry." Harry said, smiling.

"Liar."

Harry let out a yawn. Scowling, he mumbled, "Don't wanna sleep again."

"At least you're relaxed enough to now." Tonks said. "Go on and sleep."

"And if the nightmares return?"

"That's what I'm here for." Tonks said, squeezing Harry's shoulder gently. "If I can't keep them away, I'll be here to see you through the aftermath."

"...Thanks, Nym. Really."

"Gonna try to sleep?"

Harry paused for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I... think I will."

"Good. Can't think while being sleep-deprived, remember. Sweet dreams, Harry."

"G'night again, Nymmy. You aren't going to have trouble falling back to sleep, are you?"

"Nah. If there's anything good at, it's drifting off to sleep."

Harry chuckled. "If you're sure, then."

"I am. ...Harry?"

"What?"

Tonks pushed herself up long enough to kiss Harry properly. She smiled as she pulled away and, before lowering her head back to his shoulder, she murmured, "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Then for the moment, all is right with the world." Tonks said, yawning. "Now let's get back to sleep. I dunno what time it is, but I know morning's gonna come all too soon."

"Yeah." Harry said, closing his eyes. "Hopefully I'll get a break and we'll have a good first day back."

"You just jinxed it, you know."

"Yeah. I probably did."

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The following morning, it was breakfast as usual. Harry had managed to not only drift back off but also to sleep quite soundly. Tonks had to wake him up for once. Boris decided to come to breakfast with the group, citing the baffling craving for some bacon. Harry had snickered and teased the poor snake all the way to the Great Hall for it, much to Boris' annoyance.

Harry was once more wearing the locket. He had decided to wear it almost around the clock just to calm his nerves. Between the Stone's



fragment and the locket itself, Harry felt a lot better. The Eye was buried at the bottom of his trunk again. He had had to compromise. The Stone was smaller and easily concealed. The Eye, on the other hand, was decidedly neither of these things.

Pushing open the doors to the Great Hall, Harry and Tonks saw that it was already rather full. Solieyu and Luna had saved them seats at the end of the Ravenclaw table. After glancing first to the Slytherin table, then the Gryffindor one, Harry took his normal seat.

"You're up bright and early." Harry commented, glancing aside at Solieyu.

"I didn't sleep. A bad habit I'm having to train myself away from. I got a bit... paranoid over the summer, shall we say. I slept during the day while mother was awake." Solieyu said, taking a sip of pumpkin juice.

"You look better today." Tonks noted, loading her plate up with food.

"It's amazing what resolving one's problems will do. I must admit, I was more than a little worried." Solieyu said.

"There'll be plenty of time to duke it out later if we get antsy about it." Harry said, grinning as he reached for some bacon. Switching to Parseltongue, he hissed, "*Come on and get your pig, you pig.*"

"*I will bite you if you keep that up.*" Boris groused, sliding out of Harry's robe sleeve.

"Oh, you will not." Harry said, switching back to English. "Eat up. I never eat properly my first morning back, so take your time."

"Nerves?" Solieyu asked.

"Yeah. Nothing to be that worried about. Look - Snape looks about as pleasant as he ever has." Harry said, nodding towards the staff table.

It was true. Severus Snape seemed more upbeat than he normally did. He wasn't what one would call animated, but neither was he shying away from any and all discussion happening around him. Harry smirked as he watched the man before turning to look at

Dumbledore, who was smiling at him. Harry just nodded at the man, giving a quick thumbs up to let him know that everything was going fine with his group, as well.

It should have been that alone that set off the warning sirens in his mind. But they didn't come. Indeed, Harry was feeling surprisingly at ease that morning. Whether it was from the sleep or whether everything just seemed to be going smoothly was anyone's guess.

As Harry was teasing Solieyu about what he and Luna spent the night doing, more students made their way into the Great Hall. Boris had just finished his breakfast and had asked to be placed around Harry's neck so he would move less when the Ravenclaw walked. Harry did so, chuckling and making more pig jokes.

It happened when Luna was talking about how she had fallen asleep leaning against Solieyu at around midnight. A female voice from behind Harry murmured a quiet, "Excuse me."

Harry and Solieyu turned around while Tonks and Luna glanced up. Moments later, something had splashed against Solieyu's face, causing a horrid sizzling to fill the air along with the vampire's screams. Demetra Aethon stood there, a wild-eyed expression on her face and an empty vial in her left hand. Before anyone could react, she had whipped a cross out of her robes, flipped it around, and shoved it towards Solieyu's face.

It caught Solieyu on the cheek, the inverted symbol burning itself into his flesh. As he tried to duck away, and as everyone nearby drew their wands, Demetra screamed, "How does it feel knowing you've had a vampire amongst you all these years?! Albus Dumbledore knowingly allowed him to attend this school! In the name of our Holy Father and in the name of Iscariot, I will rid the school of this mons--"

Before she could finish her sentence, Harry had sent her flying back into the doors to the Great Hall. As he got to his feet and turned, he could see Dumbledore sweeping down the space between the tables. Kicking the dropped crucifix away, Harry advanced on Demetra, who had gotten back to her feet surprisingly fast given how hard she had impacted.

"Tell me, Harry Potter... how does it feel to know your friend will soon be an outcast here? That his place of salvation will become his prison?!" Demetra growled, wand in hand.

A net-like series of green lines shot throughout Harry's eyes as he brought his second wand out, growling, "Why have you done this?!"

"Because the vampires must be wiped out!" Demetra roared. "They have sided with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named! They are the darkest of the dark creatures! They are a sin against humanity and they must be destroyed!"

Harry had his arms crossed in front of his chest, but suddenly felt himself held fast. The headmaster, levitating Solieyu's stunned form behind him, walked up and murmured, "Calm yourself."

Harry changed his stance as soon as Dumbledore allowed his movement to return, instead aiming and stunning Demetra with as much force as he could throw behind the spell. Despite the girl's attempts to raise a shield, Harry's spell was backed by too much force. It broke through and connected, sending Demetra to the ground. Harry quickly turned to Dumbledore and asked, "Will he be alright?"

"Stunning him will cause the damage to lessen as I transport him to Poppy. I will remove the clothes hit with the liquid - most likely holy water - en route to prevent further burning. I've asked Minerva to handle Miss Aethon. You and your friends may come with me. But I warn you now - it may not be pretty. His life is in no danger, so please do not worry about that. He will, however, have some degree of scarring where he was struck with the holy water. In addition, the cross has etched its shape into the skin on the right side of his face. I am not sure to what extent we will be able to fix this." Dumbledore explained, quickly.

As Tonks and Luna stood and McGonagall finally reached Demetra, Dumbledore was sweeping out the doors. Harry kept his wands out, tightly clenched in his hands and, after casting a furious look at the stunned Gryffindor, followed. Tonks and Luna were right behind him. They left a shocked and painfully quiet Great Hall in their wake.

As they walked, Dumbledore moved Solieyu to float in front of him. Holding him in place wandlessly, the headmaster made a series of quick slashing motions, which tore away parts of the top of Solieyu's robes and shirt. When he was satisfied he had removed all of the spots doused in holy water, he returned the vampire to a spot behind him and increased his speed. Despite his age, Albus Dumbledore could move amazingly fast when he wanted to.

"I have been worried about Miss Aethon since she arrived." Dumbledore remarked as they climbed the stairs. "But to think she would attempt such a thing. To think that Iscariot would have their people mobilize in such a manner. It is a disgrace. Not just to our school and not just to their status as human beings. But to all good-natured vampires."

"Why was she allowed to stay, then?" Harry asked, unable to hide the anger still soaking his voice.

"Because I have personally checked her belongings at regular intervals to ensure that she would not have anything that could cause damage to Mr. Reinhardt. I have failed yet again, it would seem. And I am not pleased about it." Dumbledore said, anger evident in his own voice. "Miss Aethon will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law for this. And, suffice to say, she is expelled as of this moment. Iscariot cannot be allowed to do as they see fit to whoever they so desire."

"Hard to prosecute when your prison's been absconded, isn't it?" Luna asked.

"Rufus and I are working on a temporary solution." Dumbledore said. "I am sorry to all of you for this. For you to have finally been reunited only to have it wrenched away by another tragedy..."

"You couldn't have known." Tonks said.

"You aren't perfect." Harry added, eyes shifting back to normal. "It wasn't your fault she attacked."

"It was mine for allowing her entry here in the first place. I am not sure what madness has taken the Vatican. But I can only assume the worst." Dumbledore said.

"So what...? Voldemort has people down there, as well? How far does his reach extend?!" Harry asked.

"Farther than you might suspect." Dumbledore said, gravely. "He has had his hand in things for many years. Perhaps now, as the last good-natured vampires run from Voldemort's reign, he has ordered his men in Iscariot to act. If they do not join, they die. I will see to it that Rufus knows all about this."

"I'd love to get my hands on whoever relayed the order." Harry snarled.

"It all comes back to Voldemort. Once he stops, the chain of command is severed and those below him become unraveled." Dumbledore said. As they approached the hospital wing, he threw out his free hand, sending the doors to open by themselves. "Poppy! We have an emergency!"

Madam Pomfrey was tending to the bedding on the left side of the room. Head turning, she let out a gasp. "What on Earth happened?!"

"Iscariot has mobilized." Dumbledore said, floating Solieyu onto the nearest bed. "We were not able to stop the attack against Mr. Reinhardt in time. We believe he was first splashed with holy water. The cross-shaped mark came almost immediately after, however. I stunned him to reduce the speed at which he was affected."

"We're going to have to knock him out normally after you bring him back. This will be delicate work. The burns I can treat. The mark I'm not so sure about." Madam Pomfrey said, turning and rushing to her office.

"Isn't holy water to a vampire akin to silver to a werewolf?" Harry asked. "I thought the damage was unrepairable."

"Only if you are not prepared. Silver does not spell instant death to werewolves any more than holy water to vampires." Dumbledore said. "But we must work fast. There is a short time frame to administer the proper techniques. Stand back, all of you. We will be moving quite fast."

Harry and the girls did as they were told, walking around the next bed over to watch from the far side. When Madam Pomfrey returned, she carried with her a tray of items and several potion bottles.

"You remember the order?" She asked Dumbledore.

"I do." Dumbledore stated.

"Then let's begin. Hold on, dear - this will only hurt a short while." Madam Pomfrey said, aiming her wand at Solieyu and removing the stunning spell from him. Immediately, he began to cry out again, bringing his hands to clutch at his face, where the skin continued to turn red and bubble up. He was almost instantly knocked out with a spell, however, and his hands fell limply to his sides.

For the next ten minutes, the nurse and the headmaster worked feverishly on Solieyu's face. The girls had to look away a few times due to the need to remove parts of his skin. But Harry, who had witnessed (and caused) much worse in his years, never flinched or looked away. Indeed, if his emotions could be described in any way at that exact moment, it was restlessness. His wands were spinning wildly near his hands and he kept tapping his foot. He wanted to be over there, to be doing *something* to help. But a part of him knew he would just get in the way. He was good at breaking things down, not patching them up!

When the two were done, they were both panting heavily and sweating. But Madam Pomfrey had a triumphant (and somewhat crazed) smirk on her face as she began applying the bandages.

"He will be just fine in a few days." Dumbledore said, turning to look at Harry, Tonks, and Luna. "But I am afraid we could do nothing to remove the imprint of the cross. It has burned into him in a way similar to how the Dark Mark is burned into the skin of Death Eaters. You cannot ever fully remove it. At best, you can make it show up lighter. That is exactly what we did. It will be visible, but not glaringly so."

"As for the burns caused by the holy water," Madam Pomfrey added, picking up the knocked-over bottles and items on her tray, "His chest and neck will be sore for awhile due to the need to transplant fresh

skin to his face. He'll look a bit like a patchwork scarecrow until the weekend arrives. After that, he'll be as good as new. I guarantee it."

Tonks sunk down onto the bed they were all standing behind while Luna walked around and sat on the edge of Solieyu's. Harry glanced up at Dumbledore and asked, "What about the fallout? Now the whole school knows what he is. I can't imagine people won't be writing their parents today."

"A simple matter of reassurance." Dumbledore stated, a determined gleam in his eyes. "And to minimize the damage, you and I need to return to the Great Hall at once."

"My pleasure." Harry said, eyes flashing green briefly. "Tonks, would you stay here with Luna and Leon?"

"Sure. I'm exhausted from all of this and I didn't *do* anything. We'll run damage control if anyone tries barging in. And help Madam Pomfrey if she needs it." Tonks said.

"Right. Then let's go, Professor." Harry said, grinning at Dumbledore as he began to walk to the door. "Let's go teach them exactly who they're dealing with."

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Author's Notes: You had to have known this was coming. From the moment I brought Iscariot up to the fight Demetra and Leon had in the Entrance Hall. A surprise attack, coming completely at random on the first real day back at Hogwarts.

The vampires have sided with Voldemort. Those that haven't are now being hunted by Iscariot due to Voldemort's minions making their move. Putting the ones with power under the Imperius, they've mobilized their agents in the field. The ones who didn't join Voldemort's ranks will now be in grave danger. One more thing to worry about. Unfortunately, this problem is too big to directly deal with. One does not simply apparate into Mord-- the Vatican and demand to know what jackass has decided to render vampires extinct, after all.

Leon's secret is out. All that's left is for him to heal while Albus and Harry run interference down in the Great Hall.

And that, my friends, is where Chapter 10 will start.



## Chapter 10 – Recovery

The doors to the Great Hall burst open as Harry entered, Dumbledore a few steps behind him. The room, which had been filled with quick, hushed conversation, immediately went silent as the two stepped back in. Professor McGonagall had Demetra in front of the staff table, still stunned. Harry looked back over his shoulder at Dumbledore, who simply offered a smile. The two had talked about what they would do when they returned.

"Release her from the spell, Professor." Harry said.

"Release her?" McGonagall repeated. "I will do no such thing."

"It is quite alright, Minerva." Dumbledore said. "Please - remove the spell."

McGonagall gave Dumbledore an odd look before nodding slowly and turning to face Demetra. With a flick of her wand, the girl was freed. She stumbled briefly before quickly getting her bearings again.

Spotting Harry, she grinned and asked, "And what do you plan to do to me now? Attack me? These people should be thanking me for exposing to them the danger lurking in their midst."

"Who the hell do you think I am?" Harry growled, tiny lines beginning to sway near his irises. "Do you - or anyone else in this room - believe that I would befriend a vampire so ready to embrace the darkness?"

"All vampires live in darkness." Demetra said, straightening up. "It's a matter of time until they fall into it. Better to eradicate them before that happens than to let them join the rest of their filthy breed."

Teeth clenching, Harry had to force his other half to remain dormant a little longer. Though the lines in his eyes began to extend towards the outer edges, he remained in control. "You know nothing about him. How dare you judge him based on his kind as a whole!"

"His *kind* are a bunch of murderous creatures who survive by attacking other humans!" Demetra yelled.

"Ask him how often he drank blood before he forced himself to find an alternative!" Harry yelled back. "He receives a potion that quenches his bloodthirst. It makes it so he doesn't *need* to feed to subdue the Craving!"

"And yet it's always there, isn't it? Lingered and waiting for him to delay taking it just a bit too long. And then what, Potter? Even you couldn't take down a vampire who's lost all control!" Demetra said, laughing.

"If Leon lost control, I'd be the first person to attack to prevent him from harming anyone else." Harry stated. "I'm more than powerful enough to defeat him if it came down to it. I'm certainly more capable than you. I could wipe your existence from this planet and not even Albus Dumbledore himself could stop me!"

"I dare you to try." Smirked Demetra. "It's a long room. If the headmaster didn't stop you, if the staff didn't stop you, and if none of these people stopped you, I would stop you."

Eyes flaring bright green, Harry's entire body became engulfed in silver. A split-second later he was standing behind Demetra, pressed up against her back, one wand at her throat and the other at her heart. Hissing out a green mist, he growled in an unnatural, echoing voice, "Are you so sure about that?"

Nobody moved. Demetra, who had been so arrogant just seconds before, now stood stock still, her eyes wide and aimed downwards. McGonagall's mouth was hanging open. Her expression was similar to that worn by many of the students. And while most of the staff knew of the Patronus Armor, none had expected it to be invoked at Hogwarts. Not in front of everyone. Dumbledore, however, didn't seem phased in the least. In fact, his tone was pleasant as he began striding up the length of the room, his arms behind his back.

"You underestimate how strong Harry can be if pressed. You have done a terrible thing to one of the few people he truly cares about. Be glad I am here, Miss Aethon. Because though I am quite sure I could

stop him, I am not sure I could do so before he attacked you. The two of us have reached an agreement over this, you see." Dumbledore explained, stepping up in front of Demetra and leaning over slightly to be on the same eye level. The pleasant tone of his voice was dropped completely as he continued, "And be grateful that Azkaban belongs to Voldemort, as I would ensure your permanent residence in it by day's end were it not. As it stands, you will be detained in the lowest dungeons while I call in the Minister and the head of the Aurors. Together, we will decide a suitable punishment for this heinous act of violence against one of my students."

"You cannot overrule the word of Iscariot." Demetra hissed.

"Iscariot does not govern this school. Nor does it govern wizarding Britain as a whole. You have lost your rights. You will not be given a trial for this. Just the opposite, in fact. You will sit in your cell, magically bound, until you are transported. What happens to you after that is out of my hands. I am sorry it has come to this. But you must understand one very important thing, Miss Aethon." Dumbledore said, standing back up straight.

"And what might that be?" She asked in a snarl.

"Whatever becomes of you is better than what would have happened had I allowed Harry to go through with his original intentions. He has given me his word that he will not seek you out after we lock you up. But as you can see - he has found a method of transporting himself within Hogwarts, despite its anti-apparition field. If he truly wanted to, he could end your life and no one would be able to prove it was him." Dumbledore said.

"Is that a *threat*?"

"No. It is a warning. Behave yourself, little girl. Behave yourself and be glad that we did not decide to steal the light from your eyes forever." Harry purred near Demetra's ear. "We could have done so and no one would have been able to stop us. We are growing in power and we will destroy everything Lord Voldemort has erected. And neither your people nor the vampires that have fallen under his control will get in our way. We will cleave his dark Citadel and submerge it back into the sea from whence it came. We will twist him

out of space-time itself and separate his followers from their souls. We will destroy his Altered and render the Dementors extinct."

"How can you be so damned sure you'll *win*?" Demetra growled.

A disturbingly long grin split Harry's face as he hissed, "Because we are light and he is darkness. And darkness cannot exist so long as there is still a light shining. Our light cannot be extinguished. It will only grow stronger!"

"I believe that will be enough." Dumbledore said, suddenly. Glancing up at the staff table, he asked, "Severus, would you care to escort Miss Aethon to the dungeons with me? Harry, you may return to normal and go back to the hospital wing if you'd like."

Harry didn't move until Dumbledore had bound Demetra. Only then did he allow himself to let out a long breath. The silver glow faded away slowly as Dumbledore and Snape led Demetra out of the room. When his eyes opened again, they were normal once more. As he let his arms drop to his sides, his wands began twirling slowly. Glancing around the room, he cleared his throat before speaking again.

"Remember what you've seen here. All of you. Because if anyone attacks Leon again, they won't get off as easily as Demetra Aethon has. I've known about his condition since my third year here. In that time, he's only gotten close to missing his potion once. And even then, his willpower was more than strong enough to hold out until it was brought to him. If you don't feel comfortable at school with a vampire, then by all means write your parents and ask to be transferred elsewhere. But don't any of you think that attacking a friend of mine will go unpunished. Like Dumbledore said and as you all saw - I've found a way to circumvent the wards. I can find you wherever you go. Don't give me a reason to." Harry said. "If anyone wants me... I'll be upstairs with Leon and the girls."

Harry's hands quickly closed around his twirling wands and he tucked them away as he glided towards the still-open doors. Things had gone exactly to plan, though it had taken a bit of convincing on Dumbledore's part to get him to do it. The Armor wasn't quite his trump card, but it was related. He had invoked its power in front of the entire student body as well as the staff. No doubt word would spread

by day's end of what Solieyu really was, what had transpired with Demetra, and of Harry's new abilities.

Glancing towards Draco and Pansy at the Slytherin table, then to Ginny and Hermione at the Gryffindor table, Harry smirked as he slipped out of the Great Hall, closing the doors behind him. Word would surely get back to Voldemort somehow. It was time for Harry to pull a few tricks that would leave the Dark Lord wondering what the hell was going on for a change.

When he arrived back in the hospital wing, he looked terrible. His hands were shaking almost uncontrollably and he was walking very slowly. It had taken too much power to cross the Great Hall. He had warned Dumbledore of that possibility. He was just glad his body was able to hold itself together until after he had left the room. Halfway up the stairs, his left leg gave out on him. Only his Seeker's reflexes had ensured that he grabbed the railing before tumbling backwards. It had only gotten worse from there, however.

"Harry!" Tonks cried, rushing over when she saw the state he was in. "What happened?!"

"The Armor happened." Harry said, chuckling weakly. He allowed Tonks to help him over to the bed next to Solieyu's. "Dumbledore and I both got our points across, though. That he would not stand for his students being attacked and that I could effectively teleport around the damn school. Put the fear of god into the Death Eaters' children so they won't try anything. They won't if they're smart, anyway. How's Leon?"

"Hasn't opened his eyes yet." Tonks said, holding onto Harry until he was fully seated. "Madam Pomfrey says his condition looks better already, though."

"Leon's stubborn, if nothing else. He isn't going to let something as silly as a vampire hunter's attack take him out." Harry laughed, laying back and groaning. "Leon, I must look like you *feel*."

"So what's to become of that girl?" Luna asked.

"Taken to the lowest dungeons until Dumbledore can get a hold of Scrimgeour and whoever the hell's currently in charge of the Aurors. They'll decide what to do from there. There's no point in a trial. In addition to the Ministry having more important things on their hands, no one's gonna miss Demetra if she ups and vanishes. Obviously, we can't send her to Azkaban. I'm sure I'll find out what becomes of her. I'll pass on the info when I do." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"Hell of a way to kick off a new year here, huh?" Tonks asked, sitting next to Harry.

"Yeah. No new professors to cause trouble, hopefully, but then this happens. I think I would have rather dealt with another evil teacher." Harry muttered.

"So everyone's seen the Armor now, huh? What was the reaction?" Tonks asked.

"Shock. I know Hermione saw it back at Number Twelve, but I'm sure she's going to rail me with questions now that I've actually slid through the wards. It wasn't as easy as I'd hoped, by the way. I wasn't even sure I'd be able to do it. But Dumbledore convinced me to try. I'm still not sure it was the best plan to take, but damned if it didn't feel good to pull off. Now everyone in this school knows exactly who the hell they're dealing with. I told them that if they weren't comfortable going to the same school as a vampire, they were free to ask to be transferred. But if any of them tried anything funny to Leon, they'd do well to remember that I can get anywhere in the school in an instant... which is a bit of a *lie*, considering how badly just crossing the Great Hall messed me up. But they don't need to know that part." Harry said, opening his eyes and staring at the ceiling.

Hearing the doors opening again, Harry tilted his head back as the girls looked around. Ginny and Hermione were walking in next to Dumbledore. Hermione looked like she was talking his ear off. At around the same time, the door to Madam Pomfrey's office opened and the matron walked back into the room.

"Hey, Professor." Harry said, grinning at the headmaster.

"Hello, Harry." Dumbledore said, a smile of his own forming. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. And shaky. I don't think I'm gonna be doing much the rest of the day. I should be good for Potions this evening so long as Professor Slughorn doesn't make us write anything." Harry said.

"I can't believe you did that." Ginny said, walking over. "You left quite a commotion when you left. Both times."

"Seems to be what I'm best at, yes." Harry said, sitting up slowly. Then, turning to give the evil eye to Hermione, he added, "I'll answer any questions you have *tomorrow*."

"Aww." Hermione said, pouting.

Harry laughed, which turned into a coughing fit. "Ohhh... right, no laughing until I recover."

"What, might I ask, did you do?" Madam Pomfrey asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Someone buy me a Pensieve for Christmas." Harry said. "It'd save a lot of time. Professor Dumbledore, could you field this one? I think I could use a nap."

"Of course, Harry. Will you be able to make it back downstairs?" Dumbledore asked.

"Actually, I was thinking about just sleeping right here if no one has any objections. I'd like to stick near Leon until he wakes up." Harry said.

"I think that could be arranged so long as your group doesn't get too noisy." Madam Pomfrey said, walking over to Solieyu to check up on him.

"Speaking of, where are our resident Slytherins?" Tonks asked.

"Malfoy and Pansy said they probably needed to remain with the rest of their House to help stomp down anyone who tried doing anything funny." Hermione said. "They did say they'd stop in later, though."

"Noted." Harry said, flopping back and closing his eyes again. "Ugh... head's spinning now. I can tell I'm going to have an awful headache soon."

"Then get in that bed properly and try getting some sleep." Madam Pomfrey said, glancing over. "And if you feel like your condition's getting worse, let me know. Understand? I won't have you falling ill due to whatever stunt you and Albus concocted."

Grinning, Harry slid off his shoes and scooted back onto the bed properly. He let out another groan as he laid back and stretched out. "Think I need to have a little chat with the other me about these side effects. I can't be laid out flat every time I try invoking the Armor or else I'm gonna be in bad shape most of the year. I dunno if we just missed something when we started working on the spell or what. But I shouldn't be this bad off..."

"You *did* push yourself quite hard, Harry." Dumbledore said. "And it *was* the first time you've tried moving over a distance while in that form. It is not surprising that it has had a negative effect on your body."

"I suppose. Still gonna talk it over with him, though." Harry murmured, sleep creeping into his voice. "Needta perfect this dumb thing this year... not gonna let Tom get away with whatever he wants..."

"He won't, Harry. Now rest. I should be leaving to get a hold of Rufus. Poppy, might I trouble you to use your fire to do so? It might be best if I remained near Mr. Reinhardt for awhile. I don't expect we'll have any trouble, but one never can be too vigilant." Dumbledore said.

"Of course." Madam Pomfrey said.

"Hey, Nym?" Harry murmured.

"Yeah?"



"If he wakes up, you wake *me* up. Doesn't matter if I've only been out five minutes." Harry said.

"Gotcha. Now go to sleep, jackass." Tonks said, leaning over and kissing Harry's cheek.

"Kay." Harry murmured, giving in to the sleepiness that was washing over him.

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"Harry! Haaaarryyyy! Oi, get up, you big lump!"

Harry let out a low groan, cracking an eye open. "Who're you callin' a lump, wench?"

"You're the one who told me to wake you if Leon checked in." Tonks declared, hands on her hips. "So wake you up I have."

Harry blinked a few times, turning his head to the side. Solieyu was sitting up in bed and leaning back against the headboard. Luna was up on the bed as well, leaning against the vampire lightly.

"Hey." Harry said.

"Hey." Solieyu replied.

"How're you feeling?" Harry asked, pushing himself up.

"Like I was set on fire." Solieyu said. "I hear tale you had a bit of fun with my attacker afterwards. Shame I couldn't be around for it."

"Someone had to scare the crap out of her. Or at least everyone *e/se* at school." Harry said, smirking.

"Was it wise to do such a thing, though?" Solieyu asked.

"Meh. This isn't my trump card." Harry said, waving a dismissive hand. "No one but those at Number Twelve - plus you and Luna now - will know about my real plans for Voldemort and his new toys."

"Yes, but still..." Solieyu muttered, glancing down.

"No buts, Leon. I'll take care of business. It's what I do." Harry stated, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and leaning forward. "How long've you been up?"

"Long enough for Poppy to fuss over me for awhile." Solieyu said, dryly.

"A fun time was had by all then, huh? So, what'd she say?" Asked Harry.

"I'm free to go whenever I please. But I'll need to be careful of my face. She claims I might also feel a little weak. I've figured a way around this, but..." Solieyu trailed off, looking away. "It's a bit...embarrassing."

"Oh?" Tonks said, walking around to the other side of Solieyu's bed so he wouldn't have anywhere to look away. "Spill it!"

Sighing, Solieyu brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck. "I was thinking about changing forms. Now that everyone knows of my condition, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't be allowed that small comfort. It would lessen the pain around my face, as well. I can hold form as long as I need to. In fact, it might actually speed things up. I'm not positive, of course - I've never been injured quite like this. But when I tore up Aragog's lot a few years ago, the short time I remained in wolf form was enough to greatly reduce the number of injuries I'd sustained."

"Unnaturally quick healing, huh? Job perk?" Harry asked, smirking.

"You could call it that, yes." Solieyu said, nodding. "Anyway... Luna, if you wouldn't mind carrying me around..."

"You aren't changing into a wolf again, are you?" Tonks asked. "Bit *big* for her to carry, don'tcha think?"

"Nothing quite as large, no." Solieyu said, glancing to the blonde sitting next to him.

"Of course I wouldn't mind, Solieyu." Luna said, leaning over and kissing the vampire on a patch of uninjured cheek.

"So we can head out whenever? Leon, I'm sure you can take care of yourself just fine. And even if you couldn't, you'd still have all of us watching out for you. Just the same, it might be best if you camped out in the Pit tonight. Tonks and I can return to Ravenclaw Tower if need be. You, on the other hand, need a good, *warm* place to stay. No Nesting." Harry said, getting to his feet.

"I couldn't do that, Harry. If nothing else, though, I can rest out on the couch. That or just switch to wolf form and curl up in front of the fire. I used to do that a lot at home when I was younger. It's amazingly relaxing." Solieyu said, smiling wearily.

"If you're sure. But if you get to feeling any worse or anything, you're staying in the bedroom. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Madam Pomfrey in her office?" Harry asked.

"Yup." Tonks said. "Said she was gonna call Dumbledore and prepare a few more things for Leon. Gonna go let her know of our plans?"

"Yeah." Harry said, slipping his hands into his pockets as he headed for the matron's office. "Back in a sec, folks."

The door to Madam Pomfrey's office was cracked just slightly. As he drew near, he pulled a hand out and pushed the door open a little. "Madam Pomfrey? You terribly busy right now?"

Madam Pomfrey was behind her desk, a series of potion bottles strewn across it. She looked up when Harry spoke. "Not terribly, no. Just preparing a few things to help Mr. Reinhardt heal up faster."

"About that. We were thinking of escorting him to the Pit." Harry said. "I plan to make him stay down there the rest of the day, too."

"Yes, that will be fine. You can call me directly if need be. I believe Albus made sure our fireplaces were connected before he went about his business." Madam Pomfrey said. "Wait just a moment though, Mr. Potter. I'm almost done with this batch of potions."

"What all's there?" Harry asked, slipping into the room and leaning back against the wall.

"Mostly a series of painkillers, though there are several restorative draughts as well. The skin we fixed up will be tender for some time. I want everyone who's friends with him to help be on the lookout. Despite what you and Albus have done today, I have a bad feeling that someone might be foolish enough to attempt another attack on him. Nothing quite as drastic, mind you, but seared flesh, even when healed magically, still takes some time to return to normal. Especially for special cases as Mr. Reinhardt's. The burn was due to unnatural causes, and I'll admit to never having dealt with a problem such as this before. Through my personal research of vampires, as well as help from St. Mungo's, I was able to do what needed to be done. I'm just glad Albus had the sense of mind to do something to slow the burning down until we could heal him."

"So am I." Harry said. "And don't worry. If he leaves the Pit, he'll have an entourage escorting him around. I'm sure he'll get cranky about it. But until I can be sure no one's going to try anything stupid, he'll have to put up with it. Constant vigilance and whatnot."

As she began tucking potion bottles carefully into a small sack, she looked up. "And how are *you* feeling, Mr. Potter?"

"Better. Had enough time to replenish my magic reserves. Got pretty badly drained. I think I may need to talk to Dobby, one of the house elves here at the school, about how his kind get around the place so easily. If you'll pardon my French, it damn near tore me apart. It's not as easy as one would think, traveling as light itself. The wards here are disturbingly strong. At least, that's how they seemed to me. Maybe it was just nerves." Harry explained.

"The wards on Hogwarts are hundreds of years old. They do get replaced and fixed up every so often, but each refresh seems to make them stronger. Albus was a part of the last group to help fix the wards up. Perhaps you should speak to him about your trouble traveling between places?" Madam Pomfrey suggested.

"Maybe. I need to speak with him about something else anyway. I'll bring the subject up while I'm at it. Couldn't hurt, right?"

"Well," Madam Pomfrey said, getting up. "This is all he needs. I've marked all of the bottles with what's inside, should he need anything. I'd like Miss Lovegood to be the one to take care of them, however. She does seem to be quite good for the poor boy."

Harry took the sack from Madam Pomfrey, the two glanced out her office door. Tonks was looking highly amused as Luna tried to get rid of Solieyu's bed-hair.

"Yeah." Harry said. "She's really been a good girlfriend to him. Whether he wants to admit that she is or not. He's quite stubborn. I'm sure you're well aware of that, though."

"You have no idea." Madam Pomfrey said. "Well then, best be on your way. Keep an eye on him and, as I said, if anything should happen, contact me via fire."

"Right. Thanks, Madam Pomfrey!" Harry said, heading back into the hospital wing proper. "Okay, guys! We can go now!"

"Thank goodness. Was gettin' bored sittin' around." Tonks said, hopping to her feet.

"Luna, take these." Harry said, holding the bag of potions out. "Madam Pomfrey said she'd like you to monitor Leon's potion supply."

Luna smiled and took the sack, turning then to Solieyu. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Gimme a second. The transformation is still relatively new to me. Takes just a bit of time to get it going." Solieyu said, eyes sliding shut. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, Solieyu's body took on a faint, blue glow as it began to change. Then, all of a sudden, a tinny popping noise filled the air and Solieyu was gone.

"...Leon? Uh... was that supposed to happen, guys?" Harry asked, stepping closer.

"It's alright." Luna said, giggling quietly as she tugged the covers back. "He just didn't think about being covered up. Look, he's right there!"

As Luna tugged the covers back, Harry chuckled and Tonks let out an 'eww' - crawling around on the bed was a small, black bat. If bats could glare, this one certainly was. Solieyu flapped his wings a few times, getting used to the feeling, before taking off into the air. He let himself fly around over the bed for a moment before flying down near Luna. Luna set the bag of potions on the bed long enough to scoop Solieyu out of the air.

"Now let's see... where would you be most comfortable?" She asked.  
"Ah, wait. I know!"

A few minutes later, Luna strolled out of the hospital wing carrying the sack of potions. Harry and Tonks followed close behind her, both trying to stifle their laughter. A tiny squeak coming from the top of Luna's head caused them both to crack up again. In her wisdom, Luna had decided the top of her head would be the best place for Solieyu's bat form to rest on their trip back to the Pit.

"Luna's got a bat in her belfry." Tonks giggled.

"People have said that for ages. Now I can prove it true." Chimed the blonde.

Snickering, Harry shook his head. "Man, what a hell of a first day, huh?"

"Yeah. And it's only halfway done. Gonna be fun when class time rolls around." Tonks said. "Leon, you don't get to argue - you're staying in the Pit."

"I'll leave Boris to guard him if he gets surly about it." Harry said.

"We'd better make sure Boris knows who this bat is." Tonks said, grinning.

"Now there's a train of thought I'd rather not have arisen. Eww." Harry said, making a face.

The trip back to the Pit occurred without much fanfare, though they did get a few odd looks from people. Luna got most of them, of course. Very few people had ever seen a girl so happy to have a bat

in her hair. On their way down, they also ran across Dumbledore, who looked to have been coming up from the dungeons. After a brief exchange, with Harry saying he wanted to talk later about the Pit's guardian, amongst other things, everyone continued to where they were headed.

Giving the password as they walked down the stairs, Harry out of a relieved sigh upon entering. "We made it without trouble."

"Thank goodness. I've had enough excitement for one day." Tonks said.

"You think you've had fun?" Drawled Malfoy from one corner of the room. "Oughta hear what's been going on in the dungeons. The Slytherins were having kittens."

"Anyone try anything?" Harry asked.

"Nah. Pansy and Blaise are keeping an eye on the troublemakers, though. Said I should come down here and wait for news." Malfoy said. "So?"

Harry stepped aside and motioned towards the couch, where Luna was removing Solieyu from her hair. A moment later and the vampire had changed back to human form, wobbling slightly as he got his bearings. Malfoy cocked an eyebrow.

"You must have had an interesting trip back." Said the Slytherin.

"Mostly uneventful, surprisingly." Harry said. "Leon's doing alright. Bit shaky from his injuries, bit sore. Otherwise fine."

"Good to hear, I suppose. Well, now that I've received the news I was sent to wait for, I should go let Pansy and Blaise know. Pansy will probably want to come down and visit." Malfoy said.

"Alright. We aren't going anywhere. Not until class later, anyway." Harry said. "Seeya."

"Should I hunt down the Gryffindors while I'm at it?" Malfoy asked, getting up and heading to the door.

"You don't need to go out of your way. I can go fetch them. Nothing better to do, really." Harry said.

"Noted. Well then, I'll be off." Malfoy said. "Time to make sure no one's torn my precious dungeons up."

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Two days later was when Solieyu first left the Pit. The burns on his face had almost healed completely. And while it was still faint, the image of the inverted cross could still be made out. Harry had given everyone a talking to before they left for the Great Hall. The Slytherins and Gryffindors would help keep an eye from their sides of the room while Harry's group would sit surrounding him, with Harry directly beside him and the girls on the opposite side. If anyone tried to do anything to Solieyu, Harry would be there to drag that person off into the light. At least, that was the story he'd use.

Harry had decided now was as good a time as any to begin wearing the cloak Sirius had given to him in his will. Throwing it on, he made sure his locket was in place before smirking at his friends and purring, "Let's go."

Harry kept to the front of the pack, staring down anyone who tried looking at them funny. Luna was between Harry and Solieyu. Tonks was behind Solieyu, while Hermione and Ginny were on either side. The two Slytherins stayed at the back of the group. Harry wanted Malfoy back there, at the very least. He was quite sure that Malfoy's power was second only to his own out of their number. He wanted Solieyu protected from all sides.

Solieyu, of course, initially protested such as escort, saying it would just make them stand out more. Harry had said that that was the point. He wanted to draw out any attackers as soon as possible, if there were to be any. Midway through their trip, Harry let his personality take a back seat, figuring his other side would make a more menacing presence at breakfast.

When they arrived, Harry opened the doors and stepped into the room, coming to a halt to glance around. It was pretty full already. And as the others started to come to a stop behind him and silence



began to fall on the Great Hall, Harry cleared his throat and, in a voice that echoed just faintly, said, "If any of you are even thinking about attacking Leon, I'll find out. And Merlin help you if you try doing anything to him while I'm around. Behave yourselves, children, and give me no reason to do anything I'd regret."

Glancing over his shoulder, he nodded at the group, who split. "Come on, Leon. I know you don't need to eat, but let's try and have an enjoyable breakfast anyway, huh?"

"That would be the best thing to try, yes." Solieyu said, stepping past Harry and sitting towards the end of the table. Harry followed and sat next to him.

"Hn... I'll come out to play if I'm needed." Harry said, closing his eyes for a moment. "I should rest until then. No sense in wasting energy."

"How are your reserves?" Luna asked, glancing at the food and trying to decide what to take.

Opening his eyes and blinking a few times, Harry smiled. "Back to normal. But he's been very jumpy lately about being called forth unless we're training. Or unless another attack happens. I guess he's finding a bit of discipline and focus. I won't complain, of course. It's quite nice to not have to worry about going completely insane. Again."

"Agreed on that point." Tonks mumbled around a mouthful of toast.

"No offense, but it feels good to be out of the Pit." Solieyu stated, swirling his goblet of pumpkin juice lazily. "Bit of cabin fever setting in."

"I know the feeling. All too well." Harry said, his mind flashing back to the days he was locked up under the Dursleys' stairs. "..."

"Have many students left?" Solieyu asked. "I've been... curious."

"Dumbledore told me three have. One Hufflepuff, two Slytherin. No one we knew." Harry said, staring down at his plate of food. For some reason, he wasn't feeling hungry anymore. "It's lower than I thought,

to be honest. This was a big thing. I honestly expected a bigger backlash."

"Probably scared of what you an' Dumbledore said and did that day." Tonks said, reaching for her goblet. "That or they trust you."

Harry snorted. "The day anyone but you guys trusts me is the day I streak through the Great Hall."

"I'd be all for that." Tonks said. "I'm sure Pansy would co-sign!"

"Quiet, you." Harry muttered, giving the currently green-haired girl a withering glare.

"If they don't trust you or aren't scared of you... maybe they feel safe because of you." Luna said.

"Safe? Because of me? No one's ever been safe because of me." Harry said.

"And yet you've fought the Dark Lord and survived on numerous occasions and have defended this school practically every year since you first arrived." Luna said. "Are you sure you know how the people here feel?"

"Good theory. But witches and wizards seem to be swayed by popular opinion. Especially the young ones. If the rumor mill is saying something, it must be true, no matter how insipid it is. My proclivity for saving their hides probably never enters their heads." Harry said, grabbing his goblet and staring into it. "Being the good guy all the time? Very little reward. At least the company is top notch. If I had tried to go through all I've been through alone, I would have fallen a long time ago."

"I'm sorry." Solieyu said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"No, no. It's just... there's a lot to get done this year. And more than usual riding on me succeeding. As far as I know, I'm the only one with the ability to potentially get rid of the Altered. If I fail, or if I can't succeed fast enough... think of how many more innocent people are going to suffer and die. None of you saw what we did that night. We...

had to witness the entire ordeal, from start to finish. Every mutilated body, every child's scream, every ounce of blood sprayed across their homes... we saw it all. That we're even still sane is a miracle. If we can't do this..." Harry trailed off, swirling the juice in his goblet slowly.

"You'll do it. I know you will." Solieyu stated, turning to face Harry better.

"How can you be so sure?" Harry asked, glancing aside.

"Because you're strong." Solieyu said. "Stronger than anyone else in this room. As you said yourself - that you're even sane after witnessing the Altered's attack says a great deal of your strength."

"I've done just as bad as some of those things did." Harry said, closing his eyes. "Bellatrix, Terry... even that group of Death Eaters. I'm not strong, Leon. I'm weak."

"Everyone has a breaking point." Solieyu continued, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. When Harry turned to look back at him, he went on. "When someone is pushed to the limits of his sanity, strange things can occur. For good, for evil, it all depends on how you wield it. But there lies an importance difference between you and Voldemort. You feel remorse for those you've killed. Despite knowing what kind of people they were and what would happen if they continued to live, you still regret having to end their lives. Why is that? It's because you're strong, Harry."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "Because I'm strong." He repeated slowly. "I was out of control. It wasn't until after I'd mutilated Terry Boot that the other me began to realize things were bigger than the argument between us.

"It doesn't change the fact that you regret having to kill them." Solieyu stated. "Listen to me, Harry. There will come a time when you have to make a choice. In the heat of battle, when all you know seems to be falling apart around you, you will have to overcome your anger. You won't be able to lock it away or brush it aside. You will have to face it. You will have to acknowledge it and you will have to *control* it. From everything you've said, the other you just wants to be reintegrated

before you reforge the Gauntlet and thus effectively chain him up alongside everything else you're keeping tucked away. But there's something I don't get."

"What?" Harry asked.

"You seem to have come to terms with what you've done. Why, then, is the other you still active? Why has he not already reintegrated with the rest of you?" Solieyu asked.

"We aren't sure. There seems to be a blockage in there somewhere. But neither of us can seem to figure out where. We are, effectively, stuck like this until we can work this out." Harry said.

"Maybe you just need a big enough push. Something to drive you over the edge again." Solieyu said, giving Harry's shoulder a squeeze. "Something to force the other you out and drive *him* to the point of madness again. If you ever sense something like that coming... don't try to fight it. Let it rise, but take control over it. Don't let it rampage mindlessly. If you can gain control in a situation like that, you'll probably merge again."

"I'll never allow a situation like that to arise again. That it happened with Terry was a mistake. I should have never given in to his taunts." Harry said.

"You were under tremendous stress. Death Eaters had just killed most of your remaining family. Then an old acquaintance shows up and blames you for his own trauma." Solieyu said.

"It didn't give me the right to let go." Harry growled, banging his fist on the table. "It didn't give me the right to torture him like I did..."

"And yet you did. And there's no changing the past. I think your blockage will clear when you accept this." Solieyu said. "Just think about it, alright? I won't claim to know what happened since I obviously wasn't there. I'm in no position to judge you one way or another. But I know you, Harry. When someone close to a person is in danger or killed, that person can often do things that seem superhuman. Given your magical capability, it's a wonder you didn't destroy your entire neighborhood."

"I dunno, Leon." Harry said. "It's just... I wonder, sometimes, whether I've got enough energy left to see this through to the end. I don't think anyone can understand just how exhausting this whole ordeal is. I haven't heard from Balthazar in a long time now. I don't know what that means. I assume the Soul is still in Azkaban, but what if it isn't? What if Voldemort didn't need it once he'd gotten the island airborne? What if he destroyed it? Then what? My entire plan rests on reforging the Gauntlet, Leon. The Philosopher's Stone I can at least consider options with. But there's only one conduit gem. Without that thing, it doesn't matter if I compile the rest of the components."

"If it happens, it happens. You'll think of something. You always do. And I think that's the main point here, Harry. You're very intelligent. You can alter your plans on the fly and think many steps in advance. If one door closes, you pick another and keep going." Solieyu said, going back to leaning against the table and nursing his goblet. "I, on the other hand, have remained useless for the majority of the things that have transpired since we met."

"Not a lot you could do about that, though." Harry said. "Things happen."

"I refuse to let 'things' get in the way. I promise you, Harry. I *will* be there with you whenever you decide it's time to try rescuing the Soul. Even if we have to go it alone, I'm done sitting back and being forced to watch things unfold. You won't walk that path alone as long as I'm alive." Solieyu declared, eyes hardening as he set his goblet roughly back on the table. "We'll stop Voldemort. We'll stop the rogue vampires. We'll show them exactly who they're dealing with. Because who else is going to if not us?"

Harry smiled crookedly. "And what happens if I can't protect you? Or anyone else who comes along?"

"You will." Solieyu said.

"How can you be so sure?" Harry asked.

"Because," Tonks said, piping up. "You're the bloody hero. You've said it enough that it's been burned into everyone's heads, you know. Why ain't it in your own?"

"I'm no hero." Harry said. "I've got marginally decent luck and enough good friends to help keep me going. Right. If you're going with me, then I guess I *have* to get stronger, huh? It wouldn't do if you were taken down by Altered, after all. Guess I'll have to suck it up one more time, at the very least."

"That's the spirit!" Solieyu said, grinning. "Now you're sounding a bit more back to normal. Feel better?"

"Yeah. How the hell did this conversation become about my insecurities?" Harry asked, brow creased.

"Magic." Luna said, blandly.

Harry snorted. "Very funny. When'd you pick up your boyfriend's dry wit?"

"Boyfriend?" Solieyu repeated.

"Must have rubbed off on her." Tonks said, winking at Harry.

"Hey now..." Solieyu said, raising his hands. "She..."

"Now now, don't be shy. We all know it. Stop being so daft and just admit it. If you're gonna sit there and make me admit I have a thing for protecting people, I'm gonna sit here and make *you* admit that you do, in fact, have a girlfriend. Thick prat." Harry said.

Solieyu groaned. "Luna... help me out, here!"

But Luna was simply smiling up at Solieyu. "It *would* be nice to hear."

"I'm not fond of *any* of you." Solieyu muttered darkly. "...Oh fine, very well. Yes, Luna and I are a couple. She's my girlfriend, despite my constant protests that I'm the worst possible boyfriend she could have ever decided upon."

"He's worried about having children." Luna stage whispered, leaning over towards Tonks.

"Already thinking about kids, huh? Leon, you devil, you never told us." Harry said, nudging Solieyu, who promptly slugged him in the arm.

"It isn't that!" Solieyu exclaimed, blushing brightly. "It's just... I know there's always the chance of passing on the curse. One night, Luna and I were talking about the future. And it just sort of came up. She asked how many kids I pictured us having when we got older. I responded truthfully - I didn't know if I was comfortable with the idea of trying. The last thing I want to do is cause more suffering."

"Ahh. A natural worry, I guess. You could always adopt, though." Tonks said.

"That's what I said." Luna murmured. "He's still thinking about it."

"Who would want a vampire for a father, adopted or not?" Solieyu asked, shrugging.

"I'd be more bothered by having a father as *thick* as you, personally." Harry said.

"Hey..."

"It's true. You don't have to worry about everything, you know." Harry said.

"Oh, take a page from your own book and shut up." Solieyu mumbled.

Though things picked up a bit after that, Harry still pushed the food around his plate. He still didn't feel right, despite getting a few things off his chest. By the time breakfast was over, the muscles in his shoulders felt like they were in knots. He was also starting to get a bit aggravated with the fact that something was wrong and he had no idea what it was.

"Well," Tonks said, patting her stomach and getting up. "I think that went well. The food was good, we all got to see a bit of amateur psychiatric work, and we know that Leon doesn't wanna risk the possibility of having little bats flying around his head all day."

"Wouldn't happen until their late teens. Shut up." Solieyu muttered.

"At least we got him to finally own up to being with Luna. Not that everyone who had eyes couldn't tell already." Harry said, forcing himself to act cheerful.

"So what should we do now?" Luna asked. "We have a few hours until Transfiguration."

"I think--" Harry began. But he didn't get to finish his sentence. At that moment, Tonks and Luna both let out warning cries. Solieyu spun around and was just able to fling himself towards Harry in order to avoid the goblet that had been flying towards his head. The goblet crashed onto the Ravenclaw table, sending pumpkin juice and food flying.

Harry made sure Solieyu was alright before rounding on the Slytherin table. "Draco, Pansy, who did it?!"

"The idiot up there." Malfoy said, motioning towards a younger-looking Slytherin further up the table.

"Sorry we couldn't get to him in time." Pansy said apologetically.

"You couldn't. But now I'm gonna." Harry growled, storming over. At the same time, at the staff table, Snape had gotten up. When Harry got to the scared-looking boy, who couldn't have been in more than in his third year, he wasn't alone.

"I believe I can handle Mr. Edgeworth, Potter. Any objections?" Snape asked, glaring down at the young boy.

"...Let me know what you do with him?" Harry asked.

"But of course. Now then... on your feet!" Snape barked. The boy, Remington Edgeworth, stood up so fast he nearly toppled over backwards. "*MARCH!*"

Harry stood aside as Snape followed behind Edgeworth. Despite a burning feeling in his gut, he felt that whatever Snape would do would last longer than what Harry had been planning on. Which, despite his



anger, had been to simply flip the Armor on and scare the boy out of his mind. Walking back down the aisle, he stopped behind Pansy and Malfoy.

"Know him?" He asked.

"Smarmy pureblood with a god complex." Malfoy said. "We've been having issues with the twit for ages. He keeps trying to make everyone his year or below do things for him. This was, as they say, merely the straw that broke the camel's back."

"What do you think Snape's going to do?" Harry asked.

"If we're lucky, transfer him to Hufflepuff." Pansy stated.

"You'd think after having to clean the toilets by hand, he'd have smartened up." Malfoy said. "I think I'm going to have to help keep the rest of my Housemates in line. Perhaps reminding them of what I can do should they go out of line?"

"Perhaps." Harry said, smirking. "You are, after all, probably the second strongest person out of all the students."

"You realize I dislike being second." Malfoy said, looking over his shoulder and smirking right back at Harry.

"You're welcome to challenge the throne." Harry said, raising his eyebrows. "We could make an exhibition of it. If, that is, you wanted to be humiliated in front of the entire school."

"Oh lord." Pansy muttered under her breath.

"No need for that. I recognize your strength, Potter. Just because I dislike being second doesn't mean I can really do anything about it. You can, after all, break through the wards to travel anywhere. Nothing would keep you from shifting behind me like you did to Aethon." Malfoy said.

"That reminds me." Harry said. "I need to go talk to someone about that."

"Oh? Who?" Malfoy asked.

"An old employee of yours." Harry said, grinning as he walked back towards Tonks, Solieyu, and Luna.

"Is he...?" Malfoy began, glancing at Pansy.

"I do believe he is." Pansy said, nodding.

"I question his sanity sometimes." Malfoy said.

"Sometimes'?" Pansy asked.

"He has his lucid moments." Malfoy said. "In any case, I'm sure it will prove... interesting."

"Always time for a good show, eh?"

"Exactly."

Harry was still grinning when he told Tonks and company, "Right, I'm off to see Dobby. I'll be in the training room for awhile, I reckon. Someone come get me when it's time for class?"

"Sure. Whatcha gonna ask Dobby about? Traveling around the school?" Tonks asked.

"Yup. They get around just fine. I felt like my arms were going to snap. I'm sure there's a way. And once I find it, it'll make things much easier." Harry said. He stopped abruptly as he turned towards the doors. "Oh! And go tell the Gryffindor girls that they shouldn't look so apologetic. If Draco and Pansy couldn't stop that guy, there's no way they could have. I can't stand seeing those two pout at me like that."

"Always the lady's man, eh, Potter?" Solieyu said, dryly.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." Harry said.

"Going deaf in your old age too, grandpa?" Solieyu continued.

"I'd stay and argue about which of us looks more decrepit, but I have a house elf to see!" Harry declared, heading back towards the doors and gliding out through them, his deep blue cloak flapping behind him.

"Bet Snape taught him that." Tonks muttered. "Well, you heard the man. Let's go dump juice on the redhead and the bookworm."

"What will *that* accomplish?" Solieyu asked.

"They won't be depressed anymore." Luna stated, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Solieyu watched the girls head towards the Ravenclaw table. Casting a dark glance out the doors to the room, he muttered, "I'm surrounded by complete loons..." before rushing to catch up and stop one set of girls from dousing a second set in pumpkin juice.

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Author's Notes: Happy New Year! ...Well, for you guys it will be! I'm finishing this chapter's final little bit at 5:24AM on Christmas Eve! I hope you've enjoyed your Giant-Sized Chapter and that you had a fun end of 2007 and a great start to 2008! I don't know if I'll finish the R-Series this year, but I'll surely be getting close. And there is a potential book 8 in the works, after all. We'll see how it goes.

So this chapter wasn't meant to be so big. In fact, the last FEW haven't. But damned if they haven't taken on a will of their own. I think I can safely state that Citadel threatens to trump Goblet for the longest book so far. I'm sure you lot aren't complaining. It's nice to have so much desire to write, too. I think I'm subconsciously making up for the two months of dead air when I was having computer issues.

In any case, next chapter we'll see some more fun stuff and finally jump forward a bit past the first week of school. I think. I need to start moving at more than one to two days' pace or we'll be here for ages! Good thing most of you probably won't see a lull in the happenings. But this chapter is as far as my book guide's currently written. So between when I finish writing these notes on Christmas Eve's morning and when you lot read it on January 1st or beyond, I'll be trying to collect all the important stuff that needs to occur in this book

and write the next incarnation of the book guide. There shouldn't be any downtime between 10 and 11.

Until next time, kids. I hope you're all enjoying Citadel so far. I also hope no one thinks I'm going to give Harry uber godpowers without repercussions. You know me, kids. I like to make Harry suffer, after all!

Harry stalked through Hogwarts' corridors, heading back to the Snake Pit as quickly as he could. If there was one thing he was short on, it was time. He needed to know how to get around better. That came before everything else. He needed to be able to quickly move around Hogwarts. He knew he could accomplish it with the Armor active, he just wasn't sure how to do it without severely weakening himself. He couldn't afford to be weak. Not now. Not anytime in the foreseeable future. He had felt a bizarre resistance when he had tried to shoot across the Great Hall. It felt like something that squeezed all the air out of his lungs. It hadn't been a pleasant feeling.

But the House Elves... they got around safely. They also went all over the school. That meant there was not only a way to navigate inside the school, but it was also simple. And while Harry wasn't about to look down on a House Elf's magical talents, surely it couldn't be *too* hard if they could do it as simply as he could breathe.

He was sure Dobby would help him. Ever since rescuing him, the little guy had helped Harry out quite often. And usually in big ways. This was simply another instance of that needing to occur. He was in a pinch. And if Dobby could help, if he could tell Harry how to get around inside the wards, Harry would be able to defend the school and its inhabitants much easier. Once he figured out how to get around easily, no one was going to cause trouble at the school again without him being able to catch them. They would be the prey and he would be the hunter. And all good hunters never gave up stalking their prey.

Giving the password to Levi as he passed through the invisible wall, the door was open when he reached the bottom. Passing through, he closed the door behind him and immediately turned to head for the training room. He hadn't been in the room all that often, nor had anyone else. But it still had its uses. And maybe future generations who found the place could utilize it more than he could. Taking off his cloak, he set it in an empty corner of the room before turning and sitting down in the center of the room.

"...I guess this is it. Still a bit worked up, though." Harry murmured to himself, his eyes closing. He took a few deep breaths and started to run through a series of quick exercises to help him relax and focus.

When he felt like he would be able to concentrate on the task ahead, he called, "Dobby!"

As expected, a familiar CRACK filled the air as the excitable little House Elf appeared in front of him. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir? Is you needing something of Dobby?"

"Are you terribly busy at the moment?" Harry asked. "This... could take some time..."

Dobby blinked. "Dobby is not doing much at the moment, Harry Potter, sir. All that is being done is dishes getting scrubbed. There is always a few who don't get to sit in on the fun. So Dobby is free. What is Harry Potter wanting?"

"How do your kind do it, Dobby?" Harry asked. "Getting around the castle, I mean. I'm sure the House Elves have heard by now of what I did in the Great Hall, same as everyone else at school."

"Harry Potter was doing something very impressive, sir. Harry Potter was forcing his way through the currents, despite their best efforts! A lot of energy is needed to fight them, sir. A *lot* of energy." Dobby said, clapping his hands together and looking eerily awed.

"Wait, wait... back up a bit, Dobby. Currents? You'll need to explain a bit." Harry said, his brow creasing.

"Ah! Dobby is sorry, sir. We is rarely getting the chance to speak about the currents to anyone other than ourselves. Magical currents flow through all places where magic is being concentrated, sir. Manor houses and magical schools and wizarding communities. Any place where magic is being performed a lot! Magical currents begin forming in and around those places, sir. Like smoke in a closed room. Except the currents is not stopped by things like walls. They is extending to where the magic energy is least concentrated!" Dobby explained.

"Which is probably just about where the wards end here, right?" Harry asked.

But Dobby shook his head. "No, Harry Potter, sir. The currents is extending far into the forest and lake."

"Hm... that makes sense. But do magical beings like the centaurs and merfolk generate magic naturally? Or is it coming from somewhere else?" Harry asked, frowning.

"They is generating the currents simply by existing!" Dobby squeaked.

"I see. Okay, so... I apparently forced my way *through* these currents? I take it House Elves don't, then?" Harry asked.

Dobby nodded, his head looking like it might break free from his tiny neck at any moment. "Exactly! We is riding the currents to the points we is needing to be dropping off at, Harry Potter, sir. If we is needing to go somewhere, but the currents do not flow that way, we change from one to another."

"Riding the currents." Harry repeated, biting at his lower lip as he thought. "...But House Elf teleportation seems instantaneous. Why is there no delay if you're traveling on magical currents?"

"Well, for House Elves here at Hogwarts, we is having to memorize all currents before we is being hired on. It is one of the requirements. Therefore, we is being able to travel anywhere by taking the shortest possible route! And time is flowing different in the currents, sir." Dobby said. "...Is Harry Potter thinking about trying this?"

"Thinking about it, yeah." Harry said, smirking a little. "Not sure if I'll be able to do it, though. Sounds a bit... complicated."

Dobby cocked his head to one side before saying, "Dobby will help. Dobby will show you the currents. Then Harry Potter can be trying to get to them for himself!"

Harry blinked. "You'll *show* me the currents? What do you mean?"

Dobby stepped forward, holding out his hands. "Grab hold, Harry Potter, sir. You will be seeing soon!"

Feeling a little awkward about the whole thing, and still being somewhat confused, Harry reached his hands out.

Dobby took hold of Harry's arms by the wrists. "Can Harry Potter use his shiny light body now, sir? House Elves can reduce our state to the correct form needed to travel the currents, but most wizards is not even thinking about that. Most is simply trying to get from one place to another without taking the flow of the currents into account."

"Is that why apparition makes people feel like their eyes are gonna pop out?" Harry asked, closing his own eyes as he muttered, "Patronus Contego."

"Yes, sir. They is fighting the magical currents and pushing them out of their way. It is a dangerous method of travel, sir." Dobby said, his voice grave.

"Splinching." Harry said, the Armor having made his voice echo faintly.

"Correct. Now then. You is just needing to be watching. Dobby will take care of the rest and will make sure Harry Potter is safe!" Dobby exclaimed.

Before Harry could say anything, he felt something rush past him. It felt almost like a strong gust of cool air. And then, in another direction, another gust of air passed. More and more filled the air, traveling in all directions. It wasn't until Dobby asked Harry to really look around that he noticed they weren't in the training room anymore. Or... that's what it seemed, anyway.

They were in a strange, sky-like place where the magical currents were criss-crossing one another in a strange sort of lopsided, misshapen grid. There was no obvious ground or, indeed, anything indicating where the hell in the castle they were. The currents were of various colors and speeds, some changing from red to blue to black and then back again, some slowing to a crawl before shooting by at an amazing pace.

"This is the other side, Harry Potter, sir. This is what it is looking like when one is riding the currents." Dobby said, his voice strangely detached from the way his mouth was moving.



"How the devil are you able to see where you're going?!" Harry asked.  
"And how are we staying afloat?"

They weren't on any of the currents as of yet. But neither were they on solid ground. They seemed to simply be floating in midair, though the sensation didn't feel like it should have to Harry.

"We is still standing in that room!" Dobby said. "We has merely shifted to where we can access the currents!"

"We've shifted?" Harry asked. "Okay, so... how do you know where you're going?"

Dobby seemed to stifle a little giggle. "Harry Potter is not looking hard enough. Dobby is seeing both sides. But Dobby is used to them, sir. He is traveling them since he was very young! Harry Potter is still very new to shifting. It is taking even the best House Elves some time to learn to see both sides."

"Great. Time. Just what I don't have." Harry said. "So how do I make the training room visible again?"

"When Dobby's cousin Bippii was having trouble seeing both sides, Dobby is telling her that she should relax her eyes. It is very hard to fight the currents, Harry Potter, sir. You need to relax your body and give yourself over to them. The magical currents, they is very odd, sir. They is almost possessing a mind of their own. They is either needing to accept you or you is needing to hold dominance over them." Dobby explained.

"I dunno if acceptance is what I need to strive for." Harry said. "Especially since I might need to 'shift' in places other than Hogwarts in the future... I dunno if it'll even work or anything yet... but it would be a damn handy skill to have at Azkaban."

Dobby nodded slowly. "Then Harry Potter is simply needing to show the currents that he is strong enough to be worthy of being carried."

"And how do I do that?" Harry asked.

Dobby just smiled. "Release your power."

"What?! I can't do that! Dobby, you should know what kind of power I can generate! I don't want to do anything to damage the currents... or the training room. Or Hogwarts itself, for that matter!" Harry cried.

"Harry Potter cannot damage anything here! Harry Potter's power works differently here. Pull out your wand and try casting a simple spell, sir!" Dobby said.

"My wand? I... don't *have* them when I'm in this form unless I'm holding them when I invoke its power. Do I?" Harry wondered aloud.

He reached around behind him, where his wand was usually tucked away in his back pants pocket. After a bit of patting, he frowned. The wand seemed to materialize near his fingers. He pulled it up and stared at it. "Okay, now I'm really confused."

"Harry Potter's shiny light body is resonating on a different level. It's why you is able to travel inside the school, sir. Anything you is touching when you use the spell will convert as well. You is just having to locate it again if it was in your pockets!" Dobby said.

"Oh. That makes sense. I think." Harry said. "So... wait, do I even have to reach for it, or can I just will it into existence?"

"Harry Potter should be able to will it." Dobby said. "You is a great and powerful wizard, after all!"

Harry raised his left hand, concentrating on Cedric's wand, which he normally kept tucked up his left sleeve. A second later, the wand appeared, spinning, a few inches from his fingers. He smiled and grabbed hold of it. "Okay... okay, so I can materialize my wands in this place. But what good's that going to do?"

"Like Dobby is saying, sir - you is needing to get accepted by the currents or gain dominance. There is spells used for both. But since Harry Potter may need to access the currents outside of Hogwarts... you is only needing the latter.

"What's the incantation?" Asked Harry.

Dobby shook his head. "It is not that kind of spell, sir. It is..." The House Elf tilted his head one way, then the other, looking frustrated. "...Dobby is sorry, sir. He isn't knowing how to explain clearly. House Elves very rarely have to speak about their travel methods to other races, sir."

"It's alright, Dobby. I can work on this part later. Can we ride the currents now, though? I'd like to know how it feels." Harry said, twirling his wands before making them fade back into his body.

"Of course! Maybe the currents will be more accepting if they is knowing you are a friend to House Elves!" Dobby said.

"Perhaps." Harry replied, smiling crookedly.

Dobby took hold of one of Harry's wrists and motioned for him to 'step' onto the nearest current, a wide, snow white path that almost seemed to look like an icy river. Hesitant only for a brief moment, he took a step forward and onto the current. If he was to either be accepted or gain dominance, he needed to show trust. Without trust, one could neither be accepted or take control of something. He yelped in surprise as he sunk down a little into the current, which somewhat annoyed him as Dobby was standing perfectly on top of it.

The feeling was quite strange. It did almost feel as though he had stepped into a shallow river. He could feel the current pushing forward around his lower legs and feet, though it didn't throw him off-balance. Dobby indicated a thinner, purple current up ahead that crossed over the snow white one's path. He said it would get them moving in a circle that would eventually lead them back to the Pit. He said that to transfer, all they needed to do was to will it to happen.

Harry did as he was told, and Dobby was pleased that his instructions were being so easily followed. It also made Harry feel a bit more at ease. His shoulders, which he hadn't even been paying attention to, certainly felt knotted up. Probably the stress from the morning's happenings combined with the anxiety of this shifting business. As they traveled, with Dobby talking about the current's flow and how one stepped off to shift back into the real world, Harry began to relax. And when he did, something seemed to click inside his mind.

All of a sudden, he wasn't traveling through a nearly featureless, sky-like world. The castle was all around him, though very see-through and fuzzy. Harry stopped Dobby mid-sentence to tell him this. Dobby said that it was because Harry was getting used to being in the realm of the currents that he was finally starting to see both sides. Harry was turning his head this way and that, looking everywhere he could to take in the sights. He could see clear through the very top of the school. There were tiny, transparent people walking way up there. Turning his head to one side, he could just spot the Great Hall in the distance. He thought he saw something down below him, but the current's speed had suddenly increased and it had made him jolt.

"This is amazing..." He breathed.

"It is a very beautiful place." Dobby agreed as he indicated the next current to move onto. "Once Harry Potter is learning how to shift on his own, he can be experiencing this all the time. Ah! Look! Here comes some House Elves!"

And sure enough, a handful of House Elves came soaring by on a number of different currents, each twisting to go off into different directions. Dobby waved to them as they nearly toppled out of the currents they were on at the sight of Harry. Unable to help himself, Harry laughed.

"Has anyone ever collided on these things?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes, many times! Just last week, Gemmy and Trinket is crashing into one another right over the Hufflepuff common room! They fell out of this realm and landed on a very surprised first year boy!" Dobby said.

Harry laughed harder. "I'll have to make sure I'm paying attention when I'm here, then. Are there any Elf-free areas I can go? I wanna make sure that I don't crash into anyone and wind up in a wall or something."

"The area between Hogwarts and Hagrid's house is nice and clear. We is not going out there. He likes us, but his dog doesn't." Dobby said, shuddering.

"Fang's a big baby. He just acts scary." Harry said. "But that sounds good. I may have to go see Hagrid, whether I want to or not, so I can use his house as a launching and landing point. It wouldn't do if people saw me making an idiot of myself. More than usual, I mean."

"Dobby can be helping out whenever Harry Potter is wanting to try accessing the currents!" Said the House Elf. "Dobby will also be asking his friends about the name of the spell. Dobby *is* sorry he cannot remember, sir."

"Quite alright, Dobby. You've passed on more than enough information for the time being. Oh, hey! I see the Pit down there!" Harry said, leaning over the side of the current. "...Hah! Draco and Pansy just came in! Let's go pop in on 'em, shall we?"

Two quick current changes and they were shooting down towards the ground just inside the Pit's living room. Dobby instructed Harry to take a big step off to the right when they got a little ways above the floor. Doing so, Dobby told Harry to concentrate on reappearing, just as he did when he crossed the Great Hall. Harry smirked and focused his energy.

"...don't know what you're talking about. She is *not* my girlfriend!" Malfoy argued, glaring at Pansy.

"Oh don't you give me that, Draco! I saw you making googly-eyes at her!" Pansy said, grinning.

"What the *hell* are googly-eyes?! I don't make googly-eyes!" Malfoy stated.

"You don't even know what they are! How do you know you don't make them?" Pansy asked.

"I... dammit, that isn't the point here!" Malfoy said.

"Oh? What is the point then, Draco? Hmmmm?" Pansy asked, leaning in as her grin grew wider.

Whatever point Malfoy was going to make was interrupted. A loud CRACK filled the air next to the Slytherins, causing them both to cry

out in surprise. Harry was standing there, laughing, next to an equally amused-looking Dobby.

"Potter! What the hell?!" Malfoy asked.

"Don't *DO* that!" Pansy yelled. "You scared me half to death!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Harry said, letting the Armor fade away. "Mmph... held it a bit long. Gonna be sore tomorrow. ...Anyway, sorry, you two. Dobby was showing me how I *should* be moving through the school!"

"Oh? And how's that?" Malfoy asked.

"Long story. I'll tell you over a cup o' tea if you want some." Harry said.

"Could do with a bit stronger if you can dredge it up." Malfoy muttered, rubbing his chest.

"Head on in. I'll be there in a second." Harry said, nodding towards the dining room. As the two Slytherins started to walk past, Harry turned and knelt down to face Dobby. "Okay, Dobby. We'll meet again in a week's time, alright? During that time, I'll recover and work on holding the Armor for a bit longer. I'll give myself a full day to rest before our meeting so I can spend as much time as I can muster riding the currents."

Dobby nodded. "Harry Potter is a great wizard, sir. Dobby is sure you will be able to master this quickly!"

"I wish I believed in myself as much as you believe in me. Seeya in a week, Dobby. Malfoy will get cranky if I make him wait in there too long!" Harry said.

Dobby just grinned as Harry turned to join his friends. Before the familiar CRACK filled the air again, Harry could have sworn that he heard the House Elf mutter, "He is liking his tea almost freezing for some reason. Dobby is always telling him that it is best hot, but he is never listening..."

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The next few weeks rolled by at a surprisingly brisk pace. In that time, Harry had learned to ride the magical currents by himself, though he was quite nervous about his first real trip through them. But Dobby, following closely behind Harry, ensured that he didn't try reappearing inside a wall. After that, Harry had asked to try without Dobby being around. The House Elf had agreed, feeling that Harry seemed more than ready for his first solo attempt. Harry had shifted up to the Gryffindor Common Room, scaring the entire population in the process, to invite Hermione and Ginny for some tea. The girls, both laughing, agreed. Harry bowed, offered a goofy grin, and shifted back down to the Pit.

Dobby had been an amazing teacher, explaining every minute detail Harry could ask about the currents and how to ride them. The only thing limiting his travel was the fatigue still brought on by the use of the Patronus Armor. He could only hold form for a few minutes. It wasn't enough. He had tried forcing the time to extend by simply being relaxed when he invoked it. One time he had sprawled out on the floor of the training room and summoned it up just to see how long he could hold it when he was doing absolutely nothing. He had left the room a few short minutes later feeling monumentally frustrated.

But it was enough. Dobby hadn't been lying. Time passed differently in the other realm. Harry watched as the transparent residents of the castle seemed to almost move in slow motion as he rode the currents. And since Harry could see in all directions once shifted, he could easily and quickly plot out the fastest route to take to any given destination. If he invoked the Armor, shifted, then immediately released the spell after landing, he was left with only a mild headache that went away within the hour. It would do for now.

One night, Harry couldn't sleep. He had wanted to do something ever since he had started to ride the currents by himself. Quietly slipping out of bed one night, miraculously not waking Tonks up, Harry shifted down to the lowest dungeons. In particular, he was riding to Demetra Aethon's 'prison cell.'

He could see the girl as he drew closer. She was shackled by her wrists to the wall. Another pair of shackles on the ground were

wrapped around her ankles. She had obviously had her wand confiscated, not that it seemed to matter. She was also wearing what Harry recognized to be a typical Azkaban outfit. From his talks with Dumbledore, he knew that magical limiters as well as energy dampeners were set up through the shackles, effectively making her defenseless.

But the spells on the room didn't stop him. He wasn't coming in through the door. Shifting in, he dropped the Armor and slid his hands into his pockets. A few minutes later, Demetra slowly lifted her head. Her hair was hanging limply down into her eyes.

"How did you get in here?" She rasped.

"Magic." Harry stated.

Demetra leveled a weak glare at Harry before letting her head slump back down. "Go on then."

"Hm?"

"Do what you came here for." Demetra said. "Kill me."

"Excuse me?"

"Kill me." Demetra repeated. "Free me from this nightmare."

"No." Harry said.

"No?"

Harry smiled, stepping closer and reaching out. Putting his hand under the girl's chin, he raised her head up to look into her eyes.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I'd much rather see you suffer down here. It's much more of a reward. If I killed you, you wouldn't learn anything. Perhaps remaining down here will do something for your despicable attitude."



Tell me, in the time you've been here, have you ever seen Leon act in any way other than courteous to people?" Harry asked.

"That isn't the point. Nor is it my concern. My mission was passed down from Archbishop Valentine himself. His word is law to us." Demetra stated.

"You're acting exactly like the creatures you claim to despise." Harry whispered, leaning in closer and kneeling down. "How can you justify that?"

"We are nothing like those beasts." Demetra said, growling.

"You attacked an innocent man." Harry stated. "One who never wished to be a vampire in the first place. Alexis Palinsky attacked him when he was a small boy. His father left Leon and his mother because he was exactly like you. He thought his little boy was tainted and could never grow up to be anything other than a monster. Tell me, is it right to pass judgment on those who have no control over what has happened to them?"

"I do not care why he is a vampire." Demetra stated. "The fact that he *is* one is enough. It is enough to warrant a bounty on his head. Iscariot will seek out every vampire in existence and render them extinct. Our mission is to cleanse the Earth of the filth that has pushed its way in."

"And in doing so prove yourselves to be just as disgusting as that which you wish to eliminate. Hate mongers get nowhere in life. Tell me, Aethon - what are your thoughts on Lord Voldemort?" Harry asked, leaning in so close that Demetra couldn't look away.

"He is a vile monstrosity that should have never been. His mere presence on this planet is an offense to God." Demetra whispered.

"You realize I'm the only one who can stop him, don't you? Surely even you aren't so blind that you can just ignore that." Harry said.

"What is your point?" Demetra asked, sounding weary again.

"My point is that if I'm going to stop Voldemort and put an end to this war, I need my friends by me. I trust Leon with my life. And if that isn't good enough proof to you or your damned organization, then nothing ever will be. If any more of your people show up to try and finish what I started, I can guarantee you one thing." Harry said.

"And what might that be?" Demetra asked.

"None of them will leave in one piece." Harry murmured.

"Why not exact that vengeance on me?!" Demetra suddenly yelled. "This solitude... this silence... I hate it down here! You can kill me and no one would know, right?! So do it!"

"No." Harry said, getting back up and taking a few steps back as Demetra began to yank at her shackles. "You deserve the loneliness. You deserve the depression. You deserve every terrible thing you get. But you don't deserve death. You deserve a slow and torturous life that drives you insane. You're clearly halfway there already, since you judge a whole race as a group rather than individually. It's a shame, really... if this had happened last year, I might have been more merciful. But now? Now is a different story, Aethon. And this story doesn't have a happy ending. Not for you, not for me, not for anyone else."

Demetra just glared up at Harry as he invoked the Patronus Armor again.

"I'll go. I'll be back, though. We aren't done talking. I just wanted to see how you were holding up." Harry said.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I want to believe I can break through the brainwashing you seem to have undergone. Maybe I just want to torture you. You must be sore by now, stuck in that position for this whole time. I'm going back to my nice, soft bed. A bed where my future wife is happily curled up and dreaming. Tell me, Aethon... do you think you'll ever know what's it like to hold someone and feel their breathing change as they drift off to sleep? Do you think you'll ever be held and have that feeling of safety? That all is right with the world

for at least that one moment? No one's going to love such a hate-filled person like you. And the only thing awaiting you is more confinement. We'll see how merciful your God is to those who try executing his supposed orders. Sweet dreams, Demetra Aethon."

Harry shifted, but didn't step onto any of the currents right away. Instead, he walked closer to Demetra and got down on one knee to watch the girl for a moment. Initially, he didn't think the girl had cared about anything he had said, having stared down at the ground ever since Harry had started talking. Then he noticed her shoulders shaking ever so slightly. Then the first sobs came.

Harry stood back up as Demetra broke down into tears. Turning, he jumped onto the nearest current leading back up. Not a few months ago, he had believed that everything could change and that they could always be fixed. He wasn't so sure anymore. But the fact that he had left Demetra sobbing had to mean something. Had his words broken through her tough exterior? Had he found a chink in her armor?

Shifting back into the Pit, Harry dropped the Armor again and yanked off his glasses. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he walked back towards the bedroom. It was hard trying to be the good guy. But damned if he wasn't going to at least try to save the girl. He wasn't going to let the other him have the final word on this matter. Solieyu was attacked, but it was merely the orders of a puppet doing the attack. A girl who had probably been raised from birth to believe the religious zealotry spouted by those around her. It was like Draco being raised to believe that only purebloods should exist, Harry thought. It wasn't to say that he was ever going to trust Demetra like he trusted Draco, but neither did he think that the girl would be able to hold onto her beliefs for long. Not when the glaring truth was staring her in the face. She was stripped of her rights and shackled in an empty room in a part of the castle that was almost deathly silent. That kind of confinement could do strange things to people.

"Where'd ya go?" Tonks asked as he walked in. She was sitting up in bed, a few candles nearby lit, reading a book.

Walking over and sitting on the edge of the bed, Harry chucked his glasses onto his nightstand and sighed. "Downstairs."

"Downstairs?" Tonks repeated, closing the book and setting it aside.

"Shifted down to Aethon's cell." Harry said. He launched into a recount of all that had happened. By the time he had finished, he had laid back, his head resting on Tonks' legs.

"Dunno why you're bothering." Tonks said, idling messing around with Harry's hair. "She's one of those types who'll believe what they're told clear to the end."

"You didn't hear the sobbing." Harry said, closing his eyes. "I think I actually got through to her. I'm not sure what good it's going to do... but I plan to go back a few more times. A few weeks between trips, if she remains here at the school. Enough time for the loneliness to sink in."

"You can't save everyone." Tonks murmured.

"I know." Harry said, sighing again. "I know."

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Harry opened his eyes, only to find himself in a black hallway. Everything seemed sharp and smooth. Were any light to shine on the place, it might have even been beautiful. As it stood, a sickly dust almost seemed to roll in on its own, covering every surface around him. Not knowing quite what to think, Harry began walking.

There was only one way out of the hallway, and it opened to a small, circular room. In the middle was a low, flat pedestal. There, being held up by three silver prongs, was the missing gemstone. The Soul of Balthazar looked dull and faded, however. Harry stepped closer, reaching out to touch the gem. His hand had almost made it when a weak voice stopped him.

"I am growing weaker."

Harry glanced around, but didn't see anyone. Looking back towards the gemstone, he asked, "How so?"

"I have cycled too much energy without being given a chance to recharge..." Croaked the voice. "And the only way to recharge is to rest. Were the Gauntlet reformed... it would happen at a constant rate. I would feed from the Controller and would assist him in balancing his power. Please... I don't have much time..."

"Do you know where you're being kept now?" Harry asked.

"I have been moved many times. And whether or not the Dark Lord is fully aware of it, I have taken in a lot of information. I may be old and nothing more than the whisper of the person I once was... but I am not yet some feeble old ghost willing to give up without a fight!" Said the voice, a little energy returning to it as it finished.

Harry smirked. "So you can give me the layout of the Citadel?"

"Not the entire thing, mind you... but I know the precise path from my room to the entrance, at the very least. I cannot imagine that you would have need for more, though." Balthazar said.

"Yeah, you're the only thing we're going there for." Harry said. "Lay it on me, then. The sooner we can do this, the better."

"Yes. I am going to hold out for as long as possible. But my gem being stuck to this infernal device is leaving me in a state of permanent exhaustion. It's only through sheer will that we are able to communicate. Now then, I do not mean to be rude... but you must remain quiet and burn what I am about to say into memory. I can already feel myself growing to the point of breaking. I will not put myself into the danger zone, but it will be close."

"Right. You've got the floor then, Balthazar. Tell me how to get to you."

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Author's Notes: And here we have two major plot points. Harry begins to shift to get around the school and Balthazar, having been moved

from his original spot (and indeed, many after that), telling Harry how to locate him in the dark spire itself.

Not much to say, kids. The next chapter will be a fun one to write. October is in the swing and things will be going quite well for Harry. And you know what that means, right? I can't let the poor guy relax.

That's it. I really don't have much to say. WoW's got me by the bits, so chapters may be a slight bit late here and there, depending on how bad the fever is on any given day. But I cranked THIS chapter out during that time. So it's not going to distract me. I still think two chapters a month is a good estimate, even if I go on a writing frenzy and get more done. So there you have it, folks. Look for chapter 12 in the second half of the month or so.

Strangely, I've received a number of emails lately - sorry, kids, I really don't check my email very often, so don't be offended if I never reply - asking if Citadel is part of a series. People, check my profile. Citadel is book 6 in the R-Series! You've got a lot of reading to go catch up on!

And I also would like to apologize to my forums. I've been neglecting to check up on them for months now. I really do need to get into the habit of peeking in there when I stop by FFN. In any case, chapter 12 is already written at the time of this edit. It'll go up later in the month. I'll see you then!

## Chapter 12 – The Second Attack

For awhile, everything had been going quite well for Harry. Despite the constant threat of Voldemort looming over him, he was doing a good job at keeping up appearances. The Armor was getting closer to a pure white color, though it still put a strain on his body and mind. The last time he timed himself, he was able to hold form for just over five minutes. A painfully small amount of time in Harry's mind. For while it was more than enough to allow him near instant access to anywhere on school grounds, it didn't take into account other things.

Invoking the Defaeco's power, for instance, was still not a part of the equation. He was almost afraid to find out what even a small burst would do to him. His other half had grown bored at sitting in wait. He had been vying for position for the past week or so. Often, Harry would find himself being forcefully pushed back as his other side took full control. It was a horrid feeling. And it was one he was constantly trying to learn how to solve. Because despite the Armor's progress, Harry knew it was only matter of time. He needed to get the Gauntlet reforged quickly. If he didn't, he risked not only losing Balthazar to the ages, but also losing control over his own body.

Balthazar's plans had given Harry something to go on. He had sat up right after the vision he had been sent and, without a word to a questioning Tonks, he left bed to go draw out a crude map. Balthazar had spoke, albeit quickly, of the inner intricacies that Voldemort had spun the prison into. He knew what floor the gemstone was currently being kept on. And, unless the Dark Lord had a sudden change of mind or detected something fishy going on, that's where it was going to stay. Balthazar spoke of the path Harry would need to take. Harry hadn't gone back to sleep that night. Instead, he remained awake, staring at the map he had drawn, burning both it and the verbal instructions deep into his memory.

The night of October 17 found Harry sprawled out in bed, sound asleep, with Tonks hogging the covers to his right. He had been having wonderfully peaceful dreams during long, relaxing nights. It was a direct opposite to the madness and insomnia he had suffered through not a year prior. He should have expected things to take a

dive. It was always how things like that went down. Things would get quiet for awhile, he would get complacent, and then things would spiral downwards at an alarming rate. But even through all the times Harry had wished that it wouldn't happen for once, he never would have expected his skills to be called on so soon.

In his dream, he was walking around Hogwarts' lake. It was a beautiful, sunny day with a light, cool breeze wafting past every now and again. His friends trailed behind him, all dressed in casual clothes, as they talked about insignificant things and what they'd be doing for Halloween. In the lake itself, the giant squid was propelling itself out of the water and twirling around before crashing back down and sending waves in all directions. It was a wholly peaceful dream.

Harry glanced up, looking towards their destination of Hogsmeade, and suddenly found himself standing in the midst of a nightmare. As he had looked up, he had blinked. In that split second, the world had changed itself. The lake was thick and dark, with mud replacing the soft sands around its edges. His friends were nowhere to be found, though traces of the clothes they had been wearing were laying in heaps on the ground behind him. And the town of Hogsmeade itself?

It was engulfed in flames, with the sounds of horrible screaming emanating from seemingly everywhere. The darkness itself seemed to be rising up and crashing down on the town. The skies had grown grey and Harry found himself feeling chilled to the bone. He wanted to run, to see what was going on in town, but he found himself almost afraid to take the first step. He didn't want to see any more carnage. He didn't want to see any more death. And it was then that a cold, familiar voice spoke in a mocking tone from behind him.

"I thought you were the 'hero,' Harry."

Eyes narrowing, Harry turned to find Voldemort standing nearby, hands clasped behind his back, gaze aimed towards the burning town of Hogsmeade. He was wearing dark grey robes and his eyes seemed to glow with the reflection of the fire across the lake.

"Tom. What do you want?" Harry asked.



"I'll forgive your use of that horrible name this once." Voldemort said, smiling as he turned to face Harry. "As for what I want... I hear tale that you've gained a new ability. I would be delighted if you would demonstrate it for me. You know I love all rare forms of magic. And to see the potential birth of new magic would be glorious. To take it and twist it to my own will... to make it obey *my* commands... do show me, Harry. Show me your supposed little spell and I will judge it as I see fit."

"I'm not showing you anything." Harry said, closing his eyes and trying to force himself awake. But the usual methods weren't responding. His brow creased, causing Voldemort to chuckle darkly.

"You'll show me exactly what I want to see or I won't let you out." Said the Dark Lord.

"And if I don't?" Harry asked. "You can't keep me here forever."

"No. I can't. But I *can* detain you long enough for my Altered to feast on the fat of every wretched little magician in that town." Voldemort purred.

"What? ...No... no, you couldn't..." Harry said, realization dawning quickly. Voldemort wasn't just messing with his head. Hogsmeade was actually under attack! Closing his eyes again, Harry once more tried forcing himself awake. And once more, he was prevented from doing much of anything. Crying out in frustration, he glared at Voldemort and yelled, "Let me out!"

"You know my terms." Voldemort said, smiling again. "Show me what I want to see, Harry. Show me what's undoubtedly what you feel is your trump card."

"*FINE!*" Harry yelled, struggling against Voldemort's barriers. "Let me go and I'll show you, damn it!"

"Very well." Voldemort said, his smile splitting into a grin. And, as Harry felt himself waking up, he heard the Dark Lord add, "It is time to stop hiding."

Jerking awake as he coughed up a load of blood, Harry started to choke as he quickly sat up. Tonks was snapped out of her own sleep by this and was quickly sitting up as well to help Harry out. It took a minute of hard coughing, but Harry was able to regain control. Once he had, he flung himself out of bed and ran to his dresser, quickly grabbing a pair of proper pants and a shirt. Turning to Tonks, the only thing he could say was, "Tell him I'm going to stop them" before shifting.

The magical currents were shaking, if one could call it that. It was almost as though they could tell an unnatural disturbance was occurring a short distance away. Harry took aim at the route that would take him the furthest out and prayed the currents would keep moving him at a brisk pace. When he shifted back out, he immediately released the Armor, fearing that the time he had already spent in it was too much. As he took off in a dead run towards the town of Hogsmeade, one thing stood out more than anything else.

Because unlike his dream, Hogsmeade wasn't burning. In fact, it was hard to make out much of anything. The town was silent. And Hogsmeade was *never* silent. There were businesses that stayed open twenty-four hours a day. They would cater to night owls, those whose jobs didn't allow them out during the day, and every manner of supposedly dark creature like werewolves and vampires. It wasn't quite as bad as Knockturn Alley could get, but the town definitely had a seedy side that wasn't well known. But between Harry finding things out on his own and getting a few bits here and there from Solieyu, he had put together a pretty solid image of what it had to look like.

The town had a few lights on, yes, but what were they currently illuminating? And why didn't he hear the sounds of combat? Did Dumbledore or Scrimgeour even know that the attack was happening? Was Voldemort purposely ensuring that Harry got there first?

Harry slowed down slightly as he got near the closest edge of the town. Flashes of the part of that town the first attack had commenced in got recalled despite his best efforts not to. Windows were shattered, doors were broken in and torn off their hinges. Blood flowed out from places it had no business coming from. Arms and legs, ripped from

the rest of the body, were strewn all over the place, to say nothing of the other bits and pieces laying about.

Biting down, Harry drew his wands as he took his first step into the town proper. The silence was unholy and eerie, reminding him quite a bit of the dream where he had first got a glimpse of what would someday become the Altered. All it was missing was the fog.

'Chaos.' Whispered his other self, mentally.

'Shut up.' Harry responded. *'This isn't the time.'*

*'We need to use the Armor. Who's to say they aren't forming an ambush?'*

*'Who's to say the Armor would do anything?'* Harry replied.

*'Better to go in protected than to have none at all!'* Argued his other half. *'Do it or I'll take over and do it myself, damn it! Like you said - this isn't the time!'*

*'...How long did it take us to shift?'*

*'Almost fourteen seconds.'*

*'Damn it. That's still too long. Every single second counts. We can't risk invoking the Armor's power early or we'll risk it shutting us down!'* Harry hissed.

*'Not if we push it over.'*

*'We've had that conversation!'* Harry snapped. *'I will not risk overflow.'*

*'Doesn't look like anyone's alive anyway. What could it hurt?'*

The question hung in the air like the stench coming from the various buildings. Harry didn't have a good answer for it. Because what was the harm in it? If everyone was dead, and it was certainly seeming to shape up that way, what harm could it do? Hogwarts wasn't quite a mile away, but Harry had no doubts that the wards could act as a

buffer to the very edge of a total reversal of his power. Still, he wasn't sure what that kind of power would do to his body if unregulated.

'We can't.' He finally responded. *'It's still too risky.'*

'Coward.' Growled the other voice. *'Fine. Play it your way. Just don't come crying to me when you need help!'*

*'Wouldn't dream of it.'*

Rounding a corner, Harry recoiled. Four Altered had a hold of an elderly-looking man, who looked petrified with fear. Sensing someone else, the Altered turned and stared at Harry. And for the first time, the realization sunk in. This was it. Either the Armor worked or it didn't. If his light wasn't pure enough, what would happen? He could feel magical currents - damaged, but certainly there - that he could escape to if it came down to that. But he would have to live forever with the crushing guilt of running.

*'Pierce them.'* Whispered the other Harry, perking up at the sight of the Altered and at the feelings of panic rising. *'A burning realm... prove our power. To yourself, to the people who have survived here, to the wizarding community, and to Voldemort. Let there be light.'*

For a moment, it felt as though Harry's two sides had combined again. There was a brief, bright flash of light, which caused the Altered to let out pained shrieks. The man they had had a hold of quickly ran towards Harry, who was now protected by the Patronus Armor. It was glowing so brightly that nearly the entire street was lit up like it was day. Their light had broken through the barrier they had been having so much trouble with, but it still wasn't pure. It was still imperfect.

But that didn't matter. When the man reached Harry, Harry touched his shoulder and murmured, "Get inside. I won't take long."

The man nodded, scrambling towards the nearest building. By now, the Altered had recovered from the near-blinding flash of light that Harry had caused. Two scampered low like they were wolves, while the other two stood up on their hind legs. Both sets made for an imposing sight. But Harry had seen them before. He knew what they could do. He knew what tactics they used to scare their victims.

Knowing what he did, a grin slowly split Harry's face.

The damaged currents parted to his bidding as he shot forward, reappearing behind the group. Bringing his arms up, he merely had to concentrate to change his hands into spikes, which then shot out and through the two standing on their hind legs. The two Altered let out ungodly shrieks of pain as they writhed, trying to get free despite the pain that they were experiencing. Then, strangely, the two exploded into a faint, grey mist of dust that seemed to fade away by itself. A pair of wet objects splattered to the ground where they had been. Returning his hands to normal, Harry cocked his head as he glanced down at them. Shriveled, mangled hearts were laying there, still beating irregularly.

Before he could think about what this meant, the two wolf-like Altered lunged at him. Feeling a bit more brave, Harry held his arms out to his sides. When the Altered crashed into him, they were sent flying back down into the street, as though they had smashed head first into a trampoline. Their faces were sizzling and, once more, the terrible screams of pain filled the silent night.

"Rejoice." Harry said, stepping towards the fallen Altered. "For very bad things are about to happen."

Nearby, in the empty building, the man Harry had saved was cowering in a corner. He didn't know what the hell was going on. He had been dragged out of his house, forced to see those *things* eating his wife. Why they hadn't eaten him where he had been sleeping was a mystery to him. And then the boy had showed up. The man knew who he was. Enough light had been shining that he could make out the boy's scar. What had happened after that, though, was beyond his comprehension. And then those horrible noises had started to fill the air. He wanted to know what was happening outside yet was too afraid to look.

Sensing someone entering the building, the man looked up. Harry was standing there, still using the Armor. Harry walked over and, kneeling, asked, "Are you alright?"

"My wife..." Muttered the old man. "They... what the hell *are* they?!"

"The Dark Lord's pets." Harry said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to get here sooner. Tell me - are there other survivors?"

"I... I think so. I heard a racket out towards the center of town. I don't know anything more than that. It's been quiet since..." Said the man.

Harry nodded, standing back up. "Just wait here. You'll be safe."

"How can you be so sure?" The man asked.

"They aren't here for *you*." Harry stated, leaving the building. The center of town, huh? It was as good a place as any to check. Shifting, he picked the shortest current to take him there. From the air, he could see just how badly Hogsmeade really looked. The body count was going to be terrible. But there, under an odd, glowing dome, were at least a dozen people, all in their night clothes. The Altered almost outnumbered the wizards and witches by double. They were lurking just a bit away from the glowing dome, which was being kept going by four of the wizards within, and looked irritated.

*'What the hell is this?'* Harry asked himself.

*'Looks like they improvised.'* The other Harry responded. *'Good men. Must be Aurors. Do you think Scrimgeour told the Aurors what we were doing? To try and get them to use a suitable fake version?'*

*'Possible. How long have we been in this form?'*

*'Five minutes going on six. We're breaking our own record. But something doesn't feel right.'*

*'Agreed. Let's finish this. Voldemort's around, I can feel him. But he's here to observe. He wants to see our power.'*

*'Our plan, then?'*

Smirking, Harry murmured, *'Exhibition.'*

Shifting back a ways away from the dome of light so as not to shock those keeping it going, Harry quickly cried, "I'll take care of them! Just keep that thing going"

"W-who are you?!" Yelled one of women.

"That's gotta be Potter!" Exclaimed one of the men keeping the dome going.

"It's about time you got here, boy!" Said one of the other men holding the dome in place.

"Apologies." Harry said, walking towards the Altered. "The Dark Lord was keeping me asleep until most of the damage was done. I couldn't escape. But I promise you this... I'll kill these things. I'll kill all of them eventually. I know exactly what Voldemort is doing. And I'll get revenge for it. Not just for myself, but for everyone slain by these abominations. Now then... all of you, close your eyes. Things are going to get very hot and very bright in a very short amount of time. I don't know what it's going to do, but as long as you keep that spell going, you should be alright."

"Should'?" Asked one of the men.

"This is the first time I've been able to test this damned thing in combat. I've already killed four of the Altered, though." Harry said, smiling as the Dementors in question shuffled away from him. "What's a few more, right?"

Harry suddenly turned and launched toward one of the Altered, grabbing it by the head. Fingers extending to abnormal lengths, he wrapped them around the creature's entire head and squeezed as hard as he could. As expected, the Altered let out a shrill cry of pain and began to flail around. Any attempts to grab Harry's arm resulted in its hands getting burned up. Turning again, Harry jerked the creature down to the street as hard as he could. When the Altered impacted, it exploded into that odd, grey mist, leaving only its blackened heart behind.

"I can combat them separately... but it would take too long." Harry said. "I have something I've been practicing. It isn't good enough to take on the whole of Azkaban just yet... but it will suffice for this. If it's a demonstration Voldemort wants, it's a demonstration he will have. Look well, Tom. This is what's going to render your precious children extinct. *SANCTUS DEFAECO!*"

A giant, white sphere instantly encased Harry, the Altered, and everyone within the glowing dome. The Altered caught in the blast were instantly reduced to dust, not even their hearts surviving the light they had been trapped in. The size of the spell was much larger than Harry had intended. But there was nothing to be done about it. It was the first time he had tried to properly invoke its power. And while he was happy it had worked, he noticed something very odd. He could feel the witches and wizards who had also been encased within the Defaeco. With no other way to explain it, it was as though he could feel how much light and darkness every one of them held within. And while in most the light far outweighed the darkness, one of them was the exact opposite.

The man in question was screaming.

Releasing the Defaeco, Harry immediately fell to one knee, panting heavily. He looked up to see the man he had sensed the darkness in smoking, as though he had been lit on fire. An oddity amidst what was otherwise a perfect first showing. Harry looked to one of the men who was still keeping the glowing dome going and asked, "Was... was that all of them...?"

"Dunno. I think it is. A few broke away earlier, but... we lead the rest of the lot down here." Replied the man.

Harry instantly released the Armor. The moment he did, every muscle in his body started to cry out. Nearly toppling over, Harry let himself flop backwards instead, leaning back on his arms and panting heavily. "You should be safe to put a halt to that spell... but do me a favor, yeah?"

"Of course!" Said one of the men. "You saved our lives, Potter."

"Stun the smoker." Harry said, eyes narrowing. "He's working for Voldemort."

"What? He can't be working for Voldemort, he's an Auror!" One of the men exclaimed.

"Scrimgeour's still catching rats. He missed one. I caught it." Harry said. "Petrify him. Dumbledore and some others should be here



soon... surely if my friend hasn't gone to him by now, he's sensed or seen what's happened..."

Putting an end to the glowing dome, one of the men who had been sustaining it turned and did as Harry asked, stunning the smoking man, who had been staring blankly up at the sky, smoke still pouring from his mouth and eyes. At around the same time, one of the women in the group pointed to a group of lights that seemed to be moving toward the town. Harry turned and smiled at the sight. Backup was en route. He had no doubt that if he hadn't killed all of the Altered, Voldemort had ordered a retreat. He had seen what he had come to see, after all. What reason did he have to remain? As the men and women started to filter towards him, Harry closed his eyes and promptly passed out. It had been too great a strain. It had been a rushed thing that he had done without thinking the consequences through properly. And now he was going to suffer for it.

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Nearly a week later, towards the end of the month, Harry woke up. He was in the hospital wing, much to his annoyance. He was also promptly latched onto by Tonks, who called him an idiot for running off on his own. Weakly hugging the girl back, he apologized. When Tonks let go, he reached for his glasses. Slipping them on, he saw that the area was thankfully not crowded with everyone he knew. It was just the headmaster, Tonks, Solieyu, and Luna.

"How high?" Harry asked, his voice scratchy.

"Very. But not as high as it could have been. It seems those you saved were actually leading the Altered away from others. Their families and those seeking shelter were spared because they were willing to risk their lives. In turn, you ensured the safety of all of them. You saved well over fifty that night, Harry."

"That still leaves most of the town dead." Harry said, staring down at his lap. "That's still too many. Voldemort locked me in the vision, not letting me go until I promised to show him the Defaeco. I'm just glad we were able to control it. Neither one of us were sure how well it would work..."

"I am quite proud of your victory, Harry. Though we really must have a talk one of these days about rushing off on your own." Said Dumbledore. "Do not trouble yourself with what might have happened. You did what you could and saved a good number of people."

"People who never would have been in danger were it not for me." Harry said. "Voldemort was quite specific about what he wanted to see. Word finally got back to him about that little stunt I pulled. I should have never agreed to it."

Closing his eyes, Dumbledore let out an almost inaudible sigh. "Harry, another attack was going to come eventually. We all knew that. The difference is that this one was almost controlled. He attacked nearby so that you *would* be able to get there. If he had attacked somewhere else, what would you have done? You cannot yet apparate and magical currents cannot get you everywhere. We guided his hand. And despite the great loss we have suffered, consider it this way - it is not as bad as it could have been. Now, he will think. He will toil over what he has seen. You have essentially ensured that another attack will not happen for a long time. He will not risk losing more of his Altered unless he thinks he has a way to keep them from being killed."

"I guess." Harry said, sighing as well. "I suppose at the very least, I know all my training hasn't been in vain. The Armor works. The Defaeco works. We have a way to fight the Altered. I've proven that now. But...I still have one question..."

"The smoking man?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yeah. That happened when I used the Defaeco. I could sense the light and darkness in all of those people. The darkness in him was considerably greater than the light was. And when I ended the spell, he was smoking. What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"That your spell not only affects the Altered, apparently." Dumbledore said. "That man has been in St. Mungo's ever since. He is no longer smoking, though that effect was with him for almost three days. You have been out for just under a week, before you ask. He has not moved nor spoken to anyone since. We cannot be sure what happened, but I have my theories."

"Such as?" Harry asked.

"I believe your spell, a purification as it is, tries to crush any darkness it comes in contact with. This does not just apply to the Altered, it would seem. It latched onto that darkness it felt within the man and tried to erase it. You broke the spell before any real damage could be done, but..." Dumbledore trailed off.

"But I definitely did something. Interesting..." Harry murmured, brow creasing. "Oh man, I feel terrible..."

"You were bleeding quite badly when we arrived." Dumbledore said.

"Bleeding?"

"From your nose and ears." Dumbledore said, nodding slowly.

"Odd. I wasn't injured at all. Maybe the exertion?" Harry pondered aloud.

"Very possible. You pushed yourself well beyond your own limits." Dumbledore said.

"It also makes me think," Harry said, eyes narrowing. "That we need to get the summoning taken care of as soon as I'm back to a hundred percent. If Hogsmeade could be attacked, what's to stop him from attacking Hogwarts? The wards won't keep Altered out. And if he launched a full scale assault..."

"If it would make you more at ease, we may do it whenever you're deemed fit again." Dumbledore said. "The most important thing is that you rest, Harry."

"I suppose. If it's alright with everyone, I may just go back to sleep." Harry said.

"I think you've earned that." Luna said.

"I think you've endeared yourself to your fangirls even more." Solieyu stated.

"Don't even get me going on that again, please." Tonks said through gritted teeth.

"I see rumors have spread. You can fill me in after I get better." Harry said. "My nerves wouldn't take the idiocy right now."

Tonks shook her head, then smiled and leaned in to kiss Harry's forehead and take his glasses back off. "Sounds like a plan. I'll hopefully have the rumors squashed by then, though. So you just get a good night's sleep. I'll come check up on you tomorrow, alright?"

"Alright." Harry said. "Hey. Almost forgot to mention..."

"Yes?" Tonks said, glancing back.

One eye flickering green irregularly, Harry grinned. "Tommy isn't happy."

A few days later and Harry was back on his feet, though still suffering from sporadic bouts of violent dizzy spells. He had also been suffering from a highly-annoying constant headache. He wasn't sure what the hell Voldemort was so damned angry about. He had seen what he came to see, after all. Perhaps that was just it - he was caught off-guard. He wasn't honestly expecting Harry to succeed. Perhaps he did it all just to see Harry get killed. Harry wasn't sure. He didn't want to think about how the hell Voldemort's mind worked.

The Defaeco was another cause for Harry's concern. The unexpected side effect of latching on to the massive amount of darkness coming from the man, who Harry had found out was named Raymond Culpepper, was worrying. And yet... at the same time, it made him think. There was something he was missing here. Something just outside his realm. He knew this all meant something, but he couldn't quite work out *what*, exactly, that thing was. And if Harry Potter hated anything, it was not knowing the answer to something. But without any safe and reliable method to test out his theories, he was stuck.

Word of the attacks spread quickly. Some labeled Harry a hero. Some befouled him for not being able to show up sooner. And still others questioned his power and whether he would become the new Dark Lord after Voldemort fell. Harry did his best to ignore the rumors

going around. It did solve one problem, though - no one dared try anything against Solieyu now. Not after hearing the first-hand accounts of what Harry had done that night.

Harry had occasionally shifted to look in on Demetra. He hadn't shifted back in to actually speak with her, but he kept an eye on her nonetheless. Word hadn't got back to her yet. How would it, though? He still wasn't sure why he was paying her any attention. But he knew it would keep occurring so long as the girl remained within Hogwarts' walls. Harry had spoken to Dumbledore about the matter, but the headmaster merely said that Scrimgeour and company were still working on a solution.

As the days passed, Harry's headache finally went away and he stopped feeling Voldemort's anger. Harry didn't like it when everything went quiet like that. It meant that the Dark Lord had finally cooled off. He would be thinking now; going over potential ways to further alter his babies. This worried Harry more than anything. He barely made it through an encounter with around two dozen of the things. What was he going to do if Voldemort made them harder to kill? If he did something to ever-so-slightly tweak the Altered so that they would be immune to either the Armor or the Defaeco, Harry and the entire wizarding world were in trouble.

Halloween came and went with little trouble, much to Harry's happiness. He spent it down in the Pit with his friends, having decorated it a little. Dancing pumpkins greeted guests as they entered, while enchanted vines constantly snaked their way around the ceiling, oozing a sticky, purple liquid. That remained only as long as it took for one of the girls to get the stuff in their hair.

In early November, Harry once more approached Dumbledore about the summoning ritual. The headmaster said that the following weekend would be a perfect time to get it out of the way. Harry spent much of his free time after that re-reading the material he had collected on the subject. Beholders were not to be taken lightly. The few sane breeding colonies left required a great deal of power and tact to deal with. Harry was counting on his near-photographic memory to help him through this. His worries were lessened by the

knowledge that he had single-handedly taken out those Altered. How hard could one or two Beholders be to deal with?

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Author's Notes: The second attack has occurred and Harry's had his first real taste of both the power and the consequences of using the Sanctus Defaeco. Voldemort knows exactly what he's dealing with. And now Harry waits for the Dark Lord to make his next move. Meanwhile, plans are going forward to finally get the Pit its long-awaited guardian. But what will happen when the summoning ritual is performed? More importantly, however, is one overlooked question.

What's wrong with Harry's other side?

I'll see you next time, dear readers, when the first of a three-chapter mid-story arc begins. Without saying too much about the events to follow, I will hint at one thing - Harry won't look the same for a while afterwards. Mull over that while you wait.

## Chapter 13 – Stargazer

"I need to learn to apparate."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, gazing across his desk at Harry, who was seated on the other side. Ever since the attack on Hogsmeade, Harry had seemed agitated. Understandable, certainly. But he seemed to be pushing his anxiety aside... and wasn't doing a good job of it. He had taken to nibbling on candy-coated quills again, something Dumbledore was sure he had stopped a few years ago. In addition, he never seemed to be standing or sitting perfectly still anymore. These days, it was rare to see Harry not tapping one foot or the other.

The request hadn't been unexpected. Indeed, Dumbledore had been expecting such a request for some time now. Apparition training usually began well after the Christmas holidays. He had let the issue hang in the air for as long as Harry was willing to allow it, however. He knew what the request was really for. Thinly veiled though it was, Harry was really asking permission to apparate to any future attack sites to defend them. In the short time since the attack, Harry had seemingly intensified his training regimen. Dumbledore had been requested to come down to time him one day when his friends had been off having lunch. Harry had held the Armor for a little over nine minutes. A sizable boost from the five or so he had been able to easily hold prior to the attack.

And yet, Harry had seemed immensely frustrated that day, after reverting back to normal. When pressed, he explained that he had apparently slammed full force into another obstacle. And once more, neither he nor his other half knew what the problem was or how to get around it. So he had been stuck at around nine minutes of inactive time in the Armor. That time grew shorter as he exerted more energy, however. There was no real way of telling how long he could hold it for in a combat situation, a point Dumbledore made sure to bring up.

Despite this, Dumbledore knew that he should work with Harry. It was too dangerous not to. Not with the magic that Harry was toying with. What happened at Hogsmeade could have easily become a great tragedy if Harry had lost control for even a moment. And if Harry got

rebellious this year, when his wild magic was at its most unstable, and when he could shift to ride the magical currents, there was no telling what the results would be. Expecting this, Dumbledore had made a few calls.

"I know." Dumbledore finally said, clasping his hands together and leaned forward against his desk. He waited to see what Harry's reply would be.

It was, as expected, a forced calm. "You know? And?"

"And," Dumbledore continued, "I have spoken with Rufus about it. He has given me the green light, as it were, for you to be personally trained."

"Personally?" Harry repeated, shoulders lowering slightly. That hadn't been the answer he had been expecting.

"Yes. He was quite insistent with me that you be taught so that you might learn as quickly as possible." Dumbledore said.

"When can we begin?" Harry asked.

"I think this upcoming week, after we attend to the business of the summoning ritual." Said the headmaster.

Harry nodded, visibly relaxing. "That works. One less thing to have on my mind."

"Have you been contacted by Balthazar recently?" Dumbledore asked.

"No. I wish he'd try, though. If nothing else, it would let me know he and his gem are still out there." Harry said, face contorting with annoyance. "I hate not knowing. I hate that my only plan may be dead in the water and I won't know until it's too late. People are going to die when we lay siege to Azkaban. I'm not stupid enough to think otherwise. But if the Soul is inert then it's all for nothing!"

"Relax, Harry. Worrying will get you nowhere. Trust an old man on this, hmm? I have had many rough patches quite like this in my time.



Perhaps not on nearly grand a scale, true, but the fact remains. I know what kind of pressure it puts on one's mind and body. Are you at least trying to unwind at some point in your days?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Trying. Not succeeding very well." Harry said. "I can never truly relax when my mind's going like this. Too much in it. Too many pieces to a puzzle I can't put in their places. It's all quite irritating and stressful. No amount of Occlumency training will let me ignore the tension in my muscles. Ever have one of those aches way up at the top of the back of your neck? Up where spine meets skull? One of those."

"Indeed I have. Well, I have nothing to say, I suppose. There is nothing I can say or do that will ease your mind. But I will say this - distractions can prove most useful. Go to the library and pick out some arbitrary piece of literature. Something light. Lose yourself in the words. I would also recommend finding a record player! I find that soothing, instrumental music can work wonders on the weary." Dumbledore said.

"Where would I plug it in?" Harry asked. "No electricity, remember?"

"Magical record player. Works exactly the same save for the power source." Dumbledore said.

"One day I'll actually remember things like that. And getting some magical contacts. These glasses are getting annoying..." Harry said, scowling.

"I know of a few people who would gladly help you in that regard." Dumbledore said. "Magical contacts are quite nice."

"You've worn some?"

"In my younger days." Dumbledore said, nodding. "They were pleasant enough and don't have the risk of falling out like Muggle contacts. And there is the usual assortment of spells one can add to them, of course. Those can get rather expensive. And most are equally ridiculous, if I were to be perfectly honest."

"Why the switch back, then?" Asked Harry.

Glancing at his half-moon spectacles (and going a bit cross-eyed in the process), Dumbledore simply smiled. "They look more dignified on an old man such as myself."

"I suppose that's true. It *would* be a bit odd seeing you walking around without those on. You get used to seeing someone one way for long enough that they seem alien to you if they change something significant."

"And yet you are engaged to Miss Tonks."

Harry shot the headmaster the evil eye, which Dumbledore chuckled at.

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Harry sat on the floor of the training room, a giant summoning circle filling most of the place. It extended up onto the walls in spots. At several points within the circle stood lit candles. Harry was near the center of the room, a blindfold covering his eyes. This was one of the more reckless things he had ever attempted and he damn well knew it. Beholders weren't something to mess around with. The first part of the summoning ritual alone, which would merely be contacting one of the Elder Orbs within one of the sane hive cities. The Elder Orb would appear and determine whether the summoner was worthy of making a contract with one of the lesser Beholders.

Dumbledore stood leaning against the door, arms crossed, wand in hand. He had dealt with Beholders only a few times within his lengthy lifetime, and none of them had been anything even resembling pleasant. Harry was taking a great risk in even contacting the Other Side. Harry was aiming to make contact with one specific hive in mind - the great Beholder city of Grahaash. It was one of the primary contact spots for the demonic ritual about to take place. Sane Beholders were bred in captivity, with all insane ones being killed immediately after being born. They would be trained and raised in order to help serve those who would call upon them. In return, they escaped the Other Side, a dimension in which wizards of old had trapped them. It was a brittle relationship to be sure.

Harry had personally ordered everyone out of the Pit. He had even asked Tonks to take Boris with her, just in case. And, as an added precaution, Dumbledore had asked several House Elves to stand guard on the other side of the training room's door.

"We can begin any time, Harry." Dumbledore said, his voice quiet.

Harry simply nodded, placing his hands on the floor in front of him. As he began speaking the lengthy summoning incantation, the summoning circle on the floor began to glow. Slowly at first and centralized around where Harry was seated, it progressed outwards as Harry spoke. By the time he had finished, the room was lit up brightly from the power of the spell. Harry kept his head down, hands remaining firmly in place as he waited. Dumbledore, confident as he was that nothing bad would happen, was still slightly tense. Beholders were tricky creatures to deal with on a good day. There was no telling what could happen summoning an Elder Orb at random. If they caught one at a bad time...

Just then, a gaping void spun to life against the far wall of the room. From the hole came what sounded like hundreds of animals being slaughtered at the same time. Something spoke in a language neither Harry nor Dumbledore understood. There was a pause, then all of the noises ceased at once. And, slowly, something began to come through the void. A giant, spherical monster floated out through the hole. It was a sickly brown in color, save for sporadic patches of decaying flesh. Its one primary eye was staring forward, unblinking, as it took in its new surroundings. As it drew out further, nearly a dozen eye stalks surrounding the top of the creature came into view. Razor sharp teeth could be seen as the Beholder opened its mouth to speak.

"Who has contacted us?" It asked, its voice sounding like spikes ripping through flesh.

"I have, O Great Elder Orb." Harry said, keeping his head low. "I wish to make a pact with one of your kind."

All of the Elder Orb's eyes shifted to look at Harry. After a moment, it spoke again. "And who are you?"

"I am Harry Potter."

"And what would you seek to accomplish from this pact you seek?"

"I fight against the Dark Lord Voldemort and his disciples. A village near this place was the target of his fury recently. I wish to protect those I love. I seek to accomplish nothing more than the safety of my friends. If he attacks this place, I would wish assistance. I can think of none greater than one of your kind." Harry said.

The Elder Orb floated closer to Harry, lowering toward the ground. It opened its mouth wide, revealing a spiked, slimy tongue. Letting out a guttural growl, it asked, "You wish for nothing more than a *bodyguard*?"

"I cannot win this fight alone. Your race was condemned by my ancestors. If nothing else, it would be allowed back to this plane of existence. I beg of you, O Great Elder Orb, allow me this one request." Harry said, still unmoving despite the rancid breath of the Elder Orb coming down on him.

"Through those chosen to cross over, we have maintained a constant, if fuzzy, stream of news from this world." Said the Elder Orb. "We have heard your name, Harry Potter. We have seen the devastation created by this Dark Lord Voldemort. Do you not believe, if offered the chance, that my kind would readily joined him should he offer us a way back from the Great Void?"

"I believe your kind would never align yourself with someone evil. I have read a great amount on what your kind has suffered through. And while I would never claim to understand to what degree you have been tormented, I do know one thing. You maintain your sanity in a place where most would go insane. You continue your traditions despite knowing they are shunned by the rest of your species. And while I feel those Beholders would join with the Dark Lord, I feel they are weak. I feel that they cannot fight. I feel that they have no sense of justice. There is already a lack of justice in this world. The plight of your kind only proves this. Allowing contracts with humans allows your kind to slowly ebb back to where they should rightfully be anyway. It would be my honor to play host to one of your kind." Said Harry, finally lifting his head up.

"Well spoken, Harry Potter." Said the Elder Orb. "We shall see if you are true to your word. We have heard rumors of Madness and Dark Wizards. These things dirty the beauty bestowed upon this world by the Great Mother. And one day, we will be fully returned, to strike down the evil which plagues this place."

"I am a marked man." Harry said, reaching back to untie the blindfold. "I will face Voldemort sooner or later. If one of your kind were to be there to support me when that time comes, I can assure you our kind would reconsider its past misdeeds. I hold a fair amount of sway in the wizarding world, O Great Elder Orb. I cannot say for certain that I would be able to bring your people back to this side, but I can promise one thing."

"And what would that be?"

Harry pulled the blindfold off and opened his eyes, staring up into the Elder Orb's massive main eye. "I will ensure the safety and happiness of anyone who crosses. Every living thing untainted by darkness will fight against it. It would be my honor if you would allow one of your kind to be here when we raise the call to attack."

The Elder Orb tilted back and laughed, a horrible noise that sent chills down Harry's spine. No amount of reading could have prepared him from actually seeing a real Beholder, much less one as great and terrible as this one was. But they had not been attacked so far. Beholders had a certain method to the madness in which they spoke. Long talks and promises went a long way, especially if one claimed to be fighting against Darkness. Harry just hoped it was enough to convince this Elder Orb. He would only know if...

"I am Qixhihtiak of Grahaash, Harry Potter." Said the Elder Orb. "You may call me Gnashjaw, as your kind has never been good at speaking our tongue."

"I am honored to hear your name." Harry said, bowing his head.

"You will be sent one of my kin. When he arrives, you may ask him what he wishes in the form of food and drink. He will find his own place to rest. I also wish to make a proposal to you, Harry Potter." Said Gnashjaw.

"A proposal?" Asked Harry. This... wasn't in any of the books he had read. Beholders did not make proposals! Beholders made *demands*!

"When the time arrives, and you face this Mad Wizard you have spoken of, Grahaash will send its strongest to assist you." Gnashjaw stated.

"I... don't understand." Harry said, brow creasing slightly. "I wasn't aware that Beholders agreed to such things, let alone suggest them..."

Again the Elder Orb laughed. "There is much your kind aren't aware of, Harry Potter. I have asked you your thoughts on what would happen if this Voldemort offered us salvation. Now let me state that he has already approached us."

"What?!" Harry cried, momentarily forgetting proper etiquette. "How the hell did he..."

Grinning darkly, Gnashjaw continued, "His words were silky and his promises were great, but the truth behind them was nonexistent. He spoke in riddles and of great things to come. But the promises of a Mad Wizard are of little concern to my kind. He was not happy to hear of our decision. He tried to break through - to open a portal to the Great Void. He failed. But in his Madness, he killed ten of our number. We seek retribution for the Fallen. We seek vengeance against the Insane."

Getting to his feet, and a steely look in his eyes, Harry replied, "Vengeance will indeed be served. It would be an honor to have the help of the Beholders and their kin in the fight against Voldemort. Your kind would be the last thing he would expect."

"We will need time to prepare. We will contact you through the one being sent. He will help open the connection and allow us through. All we ask from that point is that any who survive be allowed to continue existing here." Gnashjaw explained.

"Of course. I'll ensure that they aren't shunned or attacked." Harry said.

"You are an interesting child, Harry Potter." Said Gnashjaw, turning back towards the hole in the wall, though his eye stalks continued to gaze at the Ravenclaw. "In my lifetime I have never encountered a young one such as yourself speaking the things you have spoken of. You have intrigued me, Harry Potter. Rest assured, having the intrigue of the Sane Ones is a good thing. Very few could give us cause to celebrate. This passage will remain open. I will collect the one to return here."

With that, Gnashjaw was gone. Harry felt... odd. Things hadn't gone quite to plans. But for once, it seemed he was lucking out. The assistance of the Beholders was a great tactical victory for their side. If it came down to it, the Beholders would easily destroy the vampires working for Voldemort. Harry had trumped the Altered and now he had ensured that the vampiric menace was a non-issue.

Nearly a minute later, two things flew out of the void in the wall, landing at Harry's feet. Both were scrolls, though one was considerable larger than the other. From the darkness came Gnashjaw's voice. "The bigger of the two will be needed to summon my kind when the time has arrived. Keep it safe. You will be instructed on how to use it when the time is right. The smaller one you may open now. Sign your name in blood on it, then place your fingerprints next to your name. Send it back when you have finished."

The larger one was unexpected, though the smaller one wasn't. Tugging the scroll open, Harry drew his wand and ran a slash across his right index finger. Wincing slightly, he proceeded to write his name out. When he had finished, he tapped his fingertips together to coat them in a small amount of blood. He pressed down on the scroll just beyond his name. When he finished, he banished the remaining blood on his hand before healing the cut. Re-rolling the scroll, he chucked it back into the void.

Some time later, a smaller Beholder appeared through the void. It was slightly larger than Harry's head and was a dark brown color with splotches of tan mixed in. It had five eye stalks, much fewer than Gnashjaw had, and it looked armored in a way. One of the eye stalks had a ring around its base, and there were a pair of goggles just

above its primary eye. How it would even use them was beyond Harry. But he wasn't about to question it.

"You are Harry Potter?" Asked this new Beholder, its voice higher than Harry expected. Where Gnashjaw's had been deep and grating, this one's was lighter and less horrible.

"I am. And you are?" Harry asked.

"I am Xhiblorlkhuthk. I don't expect you to be able to say it. I'd imagine you would have a hard time. As a Beholder bred to be summoned, I have had a second name, one your kind would more easily be able to pronounce. You may call me Stargazer, Harry Potter, as I have always enjoyed the sky. Through the portals to your world, I have grown to admire its beauty. The sky of the Great Void is a constant blackness. I am honored to have been chosen to cross over."

"And I am honored to have you here, Stargazer." Harry said. "And if you love the sky, I believe we can arrange for something special."

"Special?" Asked the Beholder.

Turning to Dumbledore, Harry asked, "Could you apply the same spell to the Pit's ceiling as the Great Hall has, sir?"

"I could, yes." Dumbledore said, smiling.

Turning back to Stargazer, Harry explained, "A magic that allows us to see the sky despite being indoors. It accurately reflects the current conditions outside."

"I thank you for this accommodation, Harry Potter." Said Stargazer. "I believe I will feel quite comfortable in this place."

"Gnashjaw said I should ask what you would most like to eat and drink?" Harry said.

"Any kind of meat is fine, though anything tough or chewy would be most appreciated. I will require at least five pounds a day. As for



liquid, water is fine. A gallon a day would be suitable, though I would not decline more than that if possible." Stargazer said.

"I think that can be arranged." Harry said. Glancing over his shoulder, he asked, "Let's get back to the main room, shall we?"

Dumbledore nodded, turning and opening the door. He headed out into the main room of the Pit, with Harry and Stargazer following behind him. When the two had passed by, he looked back into the training room. The hole in the wall was already starting to shrink. Looking back to Harry, he saw that he was kneeling next to Dobby, who had insisted on being one of the House Elves to stand guard.

"Dobby, this is Stargazer. He's going to help protect this place. Do you think you and the other House Elves could provide him with at least five pounds of tough or chewy meat and at least a gallon of water daily?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said. "We can also be providing wine if it would be enjoyed."

"Wine would be quite nice, indeed." Said Stargazer. "I am not as picky as some of my brethren are, however. Do not trouble yourselves with procuring expensive brands."

Harry looked back to the Beholder and asked, "Gnashjaw also said you'd find your own place to rest. What did he mean?"

One of Stargazer's eye stalks stood bolt upright and, before Harry knew what had happened, had fired a bright beam of light at the ceiling. There was a strange crackling noise for a few seconds. When Harry looked up, he saw a Stargazer-sized hole.

"Oh. Disintegration Ray. Right. Stupid question, I guess." Harry said, blinking.

"If it is alright with you, I would like to go up and further expand on my new home." Said Stargazer.

"Of course. I'll be bringing my friends back in later. They're the ones I'd like your help in protecting. This series of rooms is hidden from

most in this school. Only those I allow to know of its existence can gain entrance." Harry explained.

"So I attack whoever isn't introduced to me?" Asked Stargazer.

"Yeah. Non-lethal if at all possible." Harry said. "Only in extreme circumstances will you be allowed to kill. If Voldemort attacks the school, for instance."

"Understood. I am capable of gaining control over minds and putting others to sleep. I can also hurl others through the air. I could sling attackers against the walls until they are unconscious." Stargazer said.

"Very nice. Alright, do what you need to up there. And thank you for coming." Harry said.

"Thank you for allowing me here." Stargazer said, floating up and into the hole in the ceiling. A moment later and a bright light flashed sporadically as Stargazer began creating a series of rooms.

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Later in the day, Harry allowed people back into the Pit, introducing each to Stargazer. The Beholder said that he would do everything in his power to ensure their safety. And while a few claimed in private that having a Beholder around made them nervous, Harry assured them that the feeling would pass. When evening rolled in and everyone had left for dinner, Harry stayed back. There was something he had been putting off.

"You're dying." He stated quietly.

"*How could you tell?*" Replied Boris, who was curled up on the arm of the couch.

"You've been sleeping a lot. You've barely talked. You've barely *eaten*." Harry said.

"*Should have expected you to figure it out.*" Boris said. "Yes. *I am dying. Understand Harry, my life has gone on far too long as it is.*"

*Master Whitechapel extended it, but the magic binding me to this world is ebbing away. I'm afraid I won't be here to see the end of this war."*

Harry closed his eyes. "How long do you think you have?"

*"Hard to say." Boris murmured. "Some days, I feel like I could slip away in my sleep. Others, I feel more like my old self. But I cannot imagine that I will see the new year arrive."*

Harry swore under his breath. "That's not long... I'm going to miss you. You've been like a mentor to me."

*"And you have been a salvation for me." Boris said. "My faith in humans had all but vanished when I was sent to you. You've proven I was wrong. You've proven that there are humans who will still stand up for what's right, no matter the cost. You'll be fine without me."*

"Maybe. But I'll miss you nonetheless." Harry said, holding out his arm.

Boris paused before slithering onto and up it. Coiling loosely around Harry's neck, Boris continued, *"You've grown quite strong since we met. I am glad I was able to be some use to you; to do some good with my life. I don't know if it was enough to repent for the sins I committed while under Master Whitechapel's careful gaze, but I'd like to think it is."*

"I'd say you have." Harry said, staring into the fire. "If it weren't for you, I never would have been able to master Occlumency. If it weren't for you, that minotaur would have killed Nym back at the World Cup. You've been there for me when no one else has been."

*"I ask one thing of you." Boris said.*

"Anything." Harry stated.

*"Burn my body." Boris said. "I do not know if Master Whitechapel placed any spells on me in regards to my death. But burning me would be the best way to ensure nothing happens."*

"That's... asking a lot." Harry said, his throat feeling tight.

*"I know." Boris murmured. "And I am sorry that I must make such a request. But it would ensure that I rest in peace. My spirit will go on to join my ancestors finally. I want to be positive that my mortal shell does not do anything unsavory after I go."*

Harry nodded slowly. "I'll do what I must then."

*"Will you be alright?"*

"No. But I'll survive."

*"I could not ask for more. You'll win this war, Harry. I know you will."* Boris stated.

"Glad to know someone feels that way." Harry said. "Sometimes I wonder."

*"You will attack Azkaban and reclaim the Soul of Balthazar. You will find a way to create a new Philosopher's Stone. And you will survive the forging process. After that, it's only a matter of time. All the power you could ask for will be at your disposal. Just remember one thing."*

"What?"

*"You must remain in control. If left unbridled, power will corrupt you. If you do not force your dominance over it, it will consume you. So if you ever feel yourself losing control, remember that you're the only one who can stop Voldemort. Push down whatever anger is eating you and come out on top. Harness the power properly and no one will be able to touch you."* Boris said.

Harry just nodded again. "...Boris?"

*"Yes, Harry?"*

"Thank you."

Boris wrapped himself just a bit tighter around Harry's neck. *"You are most welcome."*

The days passed slowly after that. When December was only a few days away, it happened. Harry left the bedroom one morning to find Boris curled up tightly in front of the fire. When his greetings went unanswered, Harry knelt by the little taipan and reached out to scoop Boris up. Turning, he re-entered the bedroom, where Tonks was still getting ready. Without saying anything to her questions, he opened his trunk and pulled out a small box. It was one he had kept around to put someone's Christmas present in that year. It was just big enough for Boris to fit in. When he closed the lid, he had to stop, clamping his eyes shut as hard as he could.

Tonks walked over and dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms around Harry. Her own eyes began to sting as she held him. It was good for him to get it out of his system. It wasn't like with his relatives. It wasn't like with Sirius. Boris hadn't gotten killed fighting. He had simply expended the last of his energy and departed in his sleep. It was why Harry was allowing himself to break down.

When both of them had spent a few minutes crying, Harry started to wipe at his eyes. Picking up the box, he and Tonks left the bedroom. A few people had entered by now, turning to look as the two entered. They had been told of Boris being near the end of his life. When they had entered to hear the sobbing coming from the bedroom, each had looked to see if Boris was near the fire. Seeing the snake absent, they came to the obvious conclusion.

Setting the box down, Harry drew his wand. Taking aim, he carefully lifted the box into the air, moving it into the fireplace and gently setting it back down. As it caught fire, Harry found his vision getting blurry again. But he refused to look away. Strange as it might have seemed to some, Harry counted Boris as one of his best friends despite only knowing him for a few short years. He wouldn't look away.

"Goodbye, *Boris*." He said quietly in Parseltongue. "*I'll make you proud.*"

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## Chapter 14 – Backlash

Time had seemed to come to a standstill after Boris' death. Harry spent the rest of that day locked up in the Pit, staring into the fire and refusing to leave his friend's side until he was sure the fire had consumed his small body. After that, Harry had felt off, as though a piece of him had been cut out. He went about his days in a daze of sorts, only vaguely aware of what was happening around him. It just didn't feel right. It didn't feel *fair*. Boris had done nothing wrong. It had been too quick.

Nearly a week into December, something changed. Dumbledore had been teaching Harry how to apparate, partly to help get the boy's mind off his snake, partly because he *needed* to learn. Most of the training sessions had involved very little talk on either of their parts. Harry picked up on apparition at an alarming rate. Dumbledore wasn't sure if it was Harry's natural talent or whether it was because he had already learned a form of magical transportation. But it didn't seem right to him. He couldn't quite place his finger on why, but something felt very, very off.

As the days progressed, Harry seemed to get more focused. There was a burning in his eyes that no one had seen since before Boris' passing. It was then that things clicked. Dumbledore gave him the usual instructions and Harry followed them as usual. But, unknown to Harry, he was effectively burning up the magic in the air around him with each test. Dumbledore could feel it and sense it both. He wasn't sure what this meant, as he had rarely heard of it happening before. As Dumbledore continued to instruct him on where to try apparating to, the size of the problem grew. He finally called a halt to the day's training early, citing Harry's rapid skill progression. It was getting too familiar for him.

And while Harry went back to the Pit to work on his schooling, Dumbledore went back up to his quarters and scanned his many bookshelves. He was looking for one book in particular - a journal he himself had penned back in his youth. There were many things he was forgetting or growing foggy about in his old age and this was one

of them. After a few minutes of searching, he found what he was looking for.

Flipping it open, he scanned its pages as quickly as he could. His writing was much more elegant back in those days, even when describing terrible things. And what he was looking for was terrible indeed. When he found what he was looking for, a quick wince passed over his features. It wasn't quite the same. Harry burning up the magic in the air around him wasn't the same as it had been for Ariana. There were enough minute variations that Dumbledore felt himself relax slightly. There was no immediate risk and that was all that mattered. But it still left their side with a problem.

Harry's magic was growing out of control too quickly. His desire to grow stronger was no doubt assisted by his immense magical reserves. But it was opening up to him at too fast a rate. So far, none of the professors had come to Dumbledore with any notes about Harry, but that could change in the blink of an eye. And Albus Dumbledore was *not* going to overlook any signs this time around. And even though he had found the two situations different, they were similar enough to plant the seed of mobilization in his mind. They needed to attack Azkaban. They had to get the Soul of Balthazar out and they needed to reforge the Gauntlet in order for Harry to safely control his own magic.

Harry had talked to Dumbledore about finding out the general directions to Balthazar, but that wasn't good enough for him. They needed more information. They needed to know what kind of defenses the island had and what barriers, if any, would be waiting for them to fly into. Shutting the book, he set it back where he had taken it from, leaving his quarters to sit down at his desk. Sighing wearily, he leaned forward and took off his spectacles. There was a lot that was going to need to get done that day.

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Harry's eyes snapped open. Watching Tonks to ensure that he didn't wake her, he reached his arm out to the table, grabbing his wands. As soon as his fingers curled around them, he shifted.

Moving quickly up to the Nest, he shifted back in and let go of the Armor. Dropping back on the couch, he let out the deep breath he had been holding. His heart was pounding in his chest and his breathing was ragged. Another nightmare. They had returned regularly after Boris' death. He knew that's all they were - nightmares. No deeper meaning to them. His sleep was simply plagued by bad dreams.

Letting his head flop back as the grogginess took its course, he brought a hand up to rub at his eyes. He wouldn't be getting any more sleep that night. Shifting seemed to be a good way to get out of the bedroom without waking Tonks, as he didn't have to move to do it. The only way she would wake up was if the light got too bright. He had been making sure it wasn't.

*'This has to stop.'* Came a voice in his head. *'We're not thinking clearly anymore. It's like someone's got a vice grip on our temples.'*

"Do you think I like it?" Harry asked, not caring that he was speaking aloud. After all, who would hear him? Stretching his arms along the back of the couch, he continued, "If you have a way to keep the nightmares out, I'd love to hear it. Occlumency certainly hasn't done me a lick of good."

*'It all comes back to him.'* Said the voice. *'We need to speed our training up. We need to practice the Defaeco!'*

"No way. It's too dangerous and we still haven't worked a solid theory out on why it tried to eat the darkness from that one guy." Harry responded.

*'Here we go again! You and your god damned sense of righteousness! Nothing but pain and suffering is going to happen if we keep putting it off! Don't you get that?!'*

"I 'get' it just fine." Harry said, glaring up at the ceiling. "Do you think I like the fact that I'm giving Voldemort plenty of time to change his game plan? Of course I don't. But I'm not comfortable using it again until we've worked out the kinks."



*'Kinks be damned, we have to keep moving forward. The only time we really invoke the Armor is when we're flying around the blasted school. We have to try pressing out time out further! We managed to go over what we were capable of on the night of the attack. Surely we can do it again if we just TRY!' Yelled the voice.*

"Stop shouting. Makes my head feel like it's rattling." Harry grouched. "Look. I've got no problems with putting time aside to work on extending the time we're able to hold the Armor. But that isn't what you really want to do. You really want to do this so we can work out exactly how much power to pour into the Defaeco."

*'Of course I do. There are puzzle pieces scattered all over the floor. Don't you want to try figuring out where they go?' Asked the voice.*

"That isn't the point and you know it. Naturally I want to figure things out. But I'm not willing to put myself and the surrounding area at risk to do that." Harry stated.

*'And that is the difference between us. Ever since the split, you have been growing softer. You won't take chances like you used to. You won't push yourself to and past your limits anymore!' Cried the voice. 'Now listen to me and listen good because I'm only saying this once. You're going to do as I ask or I will start encroaching on your dominance again! Do you think you can fight me off? You couldn't last time!'*

"Don't you dare." Harry growled, glaring again. "You know the agreement. I remain in control unless the situation calls for otherwise."

*'Which this currently does.'* Stated the voice. *'As you aren't willing to go beyond the impossible anymore.'*

"And what would you have me do? How can we test the damned spell anyway?" Harry asked. "We can invoke the Armor then try invoking the Defaeco past that. But then what? Are we going to try seeking out test animals to see if we can discover and devour the darkness in *them*? Are we going to see how big we can make the sphere? I'm *not* doing that."

*'Oh yes you are.'* Argued the voice. *'We're going to purposely perform an overloaded Defaeco.'*

"No. We're not." Harry declared. "We don't even know the exact range on that. What happens if we calculate wrong? People will die. And I've had just about enough of *that*, thank you."

*'And if we don't, what happens? What are we going to do if Voldemort unleashes his full stock of Altered somewhere? What happens if he holds them back in anticipation of an attack on his floating island? What if we arrive to find the place swimming in Dementors? We have to force an overflow. We have to because we have to see how big the sphere can get before overflow even occurs. We don't know that either, remember.'* Said the voice.

"Not happening." Harry said, standing up and walking to the railing, glancing out over the grounds. "We have nowhere to test it. And if the island is that thick in Altered, we won't use the Defaeco. We'd be better off charging in with just the Armor. It did an admirable enough job back in Hogsmeade."

*'Admirable. Not perfect. Our light must achieve perfection. We must be able to annihilate every last Dementor on the island. As for where to test it, I see no reason why we can't rush into the Forest. Give me one good reason why we shouldn't.'*

"Unicorns. Thestrals. Centaurs. Especially centaurs." Harry said, ticking off things with his fingers. "Countless other living creatures? Why don't you *think* before suggesting things?"

*'Oh, I've thought long and hard about this. The only other place is in the skies over the lake. And I don't know about you, but I don't want to drown if we lose consciousness!'*

"We'll die if we do it in the Forest and get knocked out!" Harry exclaimed. "Do you not think the creatures will want to know what the hell killed their friends?"

*'I don't think any of them will survive the spell's fury.'* Stated the voice. *'Hence why I suggested it. There are no good creatures in there. Unicorns are tainted. You know that as well as I. The Thestrals will be*

*missed by no one as few even know of their existence. And the centaurs hate everything. We can shift away to avoid them if need be. But we're going to do this because we need to know the extent of our power! We have to know the breaking point!*

"The answer is still no." Harry said, raising his eyebrows as his eyes slipped shut. "Besides, it comes back to unknowns. We don't know how big the overflow could get. If the sphere kept expanding, it would take out Hogwarts itself. The barriers wouldn't be able to stop that much raw magic."

*'Think for one second.'* Growled the voice. *'The Defaeco can eat away at darkness.'*

"And?"

*'What would it do to Tom?'*

Harry's eyes snapped open again.

*'Yes. I thought so. It hadn't crossed your mind, had it? What if we can burn him out of existence using nothing more than the Defaeco?!'*

"There's no way that could work. It's too simple." Harry said, shaking his head.

*'DAMN you, we're GOING to do this!'* Screamed the voice.

"You're insane." Harry said. "We're *going* to go back to bed."

*'I may be insane,'* Hissed the voice in Parseltongue, *'but at least I know what must be done.'*

Harry felt the other half of him surge forward. He was unprepared for it and easily fell victim to the attack. Breathing out a light green mist as he took control, the other Harry smirked as his solid green eyes glowed. He hated the sudden, sickly feeling that overcame him each time he and his weaker half traded the controls, but it was necessary. The weaker half didn't know what was good for anyone. The weaker half would just sit back and let the Dark Lord's power grow.

No, that just wouldn't do. Harry, not being sure what would happen if he were to try the Armor when his weaker half wasn't in control, decided to take the long way down to the front of the school. Besides, it would give his weaker half more time to scream for him to stop. And any time he made the other version of himself angry was cause for celebration. It was quite annoying in a way, though. In the past, when they were one, they never would have hesitated. Perhaps that was why Sirius died and he was born. He wasn't sure. But he knew one thing - that day had awakened something in Harry. The desire to kill. The desire to push beyond his limits and to grasp the impossible. The power surge he had experienced that day had been almost devastating. He was surprised his weaker half had been able to even remain in control of it as long as he had.

Making his way to ground level, Harry pushed open one of the two doors and stepped back into the cool winter night's air. It was a bit chilly out. If it hadn't involved both using the Armor and going back to the Pit, he would have gone to get better dressed. But, he figured, no one was going to be around to witness what was going to happen... though many probably would see the aftermath. He was sure his being in control would cause a natural overflow, since he effectively was Harry's wild side. That was another reason to not try and shift. When he finally did decide to invoke the Patronus Armor, he wanted to make sure he was good and deep into the forest.

Of course, it would be dangerous stepping into the Forest even with his wands. But then, he was quite sure nothing would bother him. If something did, he would always *try* shifting. One never knew - it might just work if his weaker half determined the danger to be great enough. Speaking of, as he got closer to the Forest, his weaker half's shouting had increased in volume.

"Oi." Harry said out loud. "If you don't shut up, I'm not going to be able to listen for things that might try creeping up on us out there."

*'Turn back!' Yelled the 'real' Harry. 'We can still go back to bed! You can't DO this! It isn't your decision to make!'*

"Of course it is. We are the savior of the wizarding world. What lies in this Forest is merely darkness personified. No light travels through

this place, even when the sun is up. Have you ever stopped to think why?" Harry asked.

*'But the centaurs...'*

"The centaurs in this place are different. They have grown slovenly and weak. They have given in to desire and philosophy. Speaking of, I think I know how to get a Philosopher's Stone. If you're willing to hear me out."

*'I don't WANT to hear your ideas. I just want you to turn around and go back in! Please! Don't do this! I don't want that much blood on my hands!'*

"You don't get a say anymore." Murmured Harry, his eyes shining brighter as he took that first step into the woods. "You've lost that right. Now sit back and shut up. I need to keep my ears open. We have a bit of a walk ahead of us. We're going to see an old friend."

*'Old friend? ...Aragog?!'*

"Bingo." Harry whispered. "You've wanted to make him pay for attacking us. For attacking Tonks. For attacking Leon. We can exact that revenge right now. Admit it - you want to."

*'No!'*

Harry sighed. "And that is why I am in control right now."

Trudging through the forest at a brisk pace, Harry headed straight for where he remembered the acromantula's lair to be. The Forest was quiet tonight. Almost disturbingly so, in fact. But Harry didn't much care. There was a job that had to be done. And if his weaker half would not consent, then his weaker half be damned. Optimally, they would merge again and they would be able to see what needed to be done. But it was looking like that wasn't going to happen. He was irritated, yes, but there was nothing to be done for it. He would just have to remain in control under Voldemort's spell. The only problem was the unknown in forcing the overflow. The backlash of magical energy would be devastating, to be sure. But what would it do *him*? That

was one thing he hadn't been able to think up a proper answer for. It was one of the reasons this had to be done.

Surprisingly soft footfalls brought Harry to a halt. He turned his head slightly. "...Can I help you?"

"Why are you here?" Growled a dirty-grey centaur. He was leading a small pack. The others remained behind their commander, spears and bows at the ready.

"I am here to destroy Aragog and his kin. The power required will kill everything in the area. I suggest you get your kind out if you want to live. Consider that your only warning, centaur. I do not like your kind. I will not be threatened. And I will not be stopped." Harry said, turning to glare at the lead centaur.

"You dare issue an order to us?" Asked the centaur, teeth clenching as he finished. "Do you know to who you speak, human?"

"I do not know and I do not care." Harry said, bringing his wands up. "I told you what I was here to do. What you do now is your business. But if you try attacking, I'll personally see to it that your end, as well as those who follow you, will be quick. You should be happy that I'm feeling merciful. You won't have to be caught in the backlash!"

The centaur roared out something in a language Harry couldn't understand. But he didn't need to know the words to know the meaning. The centaurs all readied their weapons while the leader backed up and prepared to charge. Harry narrowed his eyes. Why did everyone have to be so obstinate?

The leader ran forward at full speed, spear extended and aimed at Harry's head. Whether his weaker half wanted to comply was irrelevant now. He was going to have to do it sooner or later. Forcing the Patronus Armor up, Harry quickly shifted to a spot a few feet in the air above the charging centaur. The Armor didn't quite feel right, as though his weaker half was trying to force him out of it. No matter - he wasn't strong enough. Shifting back, Harry let off a couple of strong slashing hexes before shifting to a new spot. When the first attacks caught the centaur in the back, a new pair had been loosed

from one side. The centaur reared back from the pain of the first two, his left back leg getting hit with both of the second.

It was enough to cause him to lose his balance. He slammed into the ground hard just as Harry reappeared in a new position - just out of spear's reach in front of the centaur. He had both arms raised over his head. The centaur, gripping his spear in one hand, quickly began to get to his feet as best he could. His back was screaming in pain and his back left leg was going to be almost useless. But as long as he could stand, he could fight.

"Stay down." Harry growled. "Final warning."

"No one orders me!" Yelled the centaur.

"And no one ever will again. *SECTUMSEMPRA!*" Harry yelled back, jerking his arms straight down as fast as he could.

The twin spells connected to the front of the centaur as he was getting back up. Cleaving deep into his head and body, his blood sprayed as he dropped back to the ground. Twisting his face up as blood splattered onto him, Harry glanced over at the centaur's pack.

"I have all the time in the world right now. Shall I just kill you all now or will you listen to me and *run?*" Harry asked. "I won't draw things out with any of you like I did with your glorious leader."

"You will pay for harming him, Harry Potter." Said one of the centaurs. "When word gets back to our elder..."

"There will be no elder when I am through here." Harry said, a smile splitting his face. "In fact, there won't be much of anything left when I'm done. You can be caught in the blast or you can choose to lay down your arms and warn the rest of your kind. The choice is yours. I really don't care what you do."

"We will return to our village. We must inform the elder of your crime." Said the centaur, motioning for the rest of the pack to follow him. "Do not think this is over."

"Not yet it isn't. Will be soon enough." Harry muttered as the remaining centaurs turned and ran back off. Glancing down, Harry saw the leader was still alive. He was bleeding heavily and seemed to be blinded by the blood pouring down and over his eyes, but he was trying in vain to move. "And what do you think *you're* doing?"

"You... will be stopped..." Growled the centaur weakly.

Harry turned, twirling his wands lazily as he ventured deeper into the Forest, leaving the dying centaur behind. "Nothing will stop me. Nothing has enough power to. Now if you'll excuse me, I must finish what I came here to do."

The Forest grew darker as he progressed inwards. It wasn't like the last time he had been this far in, though. This time, he was the strongest thing around. He wasn't going to be chased off by overgrown spiders this time. His weaker half continued to yell at him in a laughable attempt to make him stop. He was currently asking what Hagrid would think if they killed his old pet.

"I thought we hated Hagrid." Harry said, smirking.

*'We hate what he did!'* Argued the voice in his head. *'We don't want this to happen, though!'*

"Pity." Harry murmured.

*'Are you really going to go through with this?'* Asked the voice, sounding tired finally.

"Of course. We must know. We must be able to force pieces of the puzzle in place. We cannot work with unfounded theories. We need evidence of what an overflow will produce." Harry explained. "We need to feel the darkness. We need to see how it reacts within the Defaeco when it is pushed beyond its limits. We need to know what it will do."

*'No matter the cost?'*

"No matter the cost. Quiet, we're getting close." Harry muttered, gripping his wands properly.



*'I thought you weren't afraid of the spiders.'* The voice said, mockingly.

*'No sense drawing attention to ourselves before we are ready for it.'*  
Replied Harry mentally.

Despite this, he was noticed anyway. They were trying to hide themselves in the thick brush on either side of the clearing, but Harry could both see and hear them. Giant spiders didn't sneak very well. There was a hushed chittering noise that was steadily growing louder as he moved further towards Aragog's den. When he drew near the entrance, a quartet of larger than average spiders descended from above, blocking the way.

"Out of the way. I mean to see Aragog." Harry stated, raising his wands. "Move or die. It's your call."

The spiders hissed at Harry, who smiled in response. He didn't know whether the acromantulas were going to attack or not. He was hoping they wouldn't, though. More energy expended. It was bad enough that the Armor wasn't bending to his will properly. He didn't want to waste energy that could be used to pump the Defaeco over.

"I recognize your scent." Came a deep voice from within the den. Immediately, the quartet of spiders got out of the way. Legs became visible shortly before Aragog's head appeared at the entrance to his den. "What are you doing back here?"

"Getting my revenge." Harry whispered. "Patronus Contego!"

The Armor shone brightly in the darkness of the clearing, causing an immediate reaction to the spiders in the area. Many scurried away, getting as far from the light as they could. Others remained close to Aragog. Not that it mattered. In the end, they would all befall the same fate. Staying to guard their precious leader or running in terror from the light, they would all wind up dead in the end. And, as the voice in his head screamed for him to stop, he threw his head back and roared.

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Albus Dumbledore had had a long day. It had been a day that would have worn out men half his age. Tugging his spectacles off, Dumbledore tilted his head to each side, producing a painful series of pops and cracks in his neck. The initial pain passed, giving way to much needed relief. He had been too tense in his dealings with Scrimgeour. They had talked for the better part of the day, as Scrimgeour had said all his teams were out working on projects for him. That gave him a bit of down time from all of the working. If there was one thing Rufus Scrimgeour didn't like, it was paperwork. And that seemed to be all he was getting flooded with.

Yawning, Dumbledore got up from his desk and stretched. Another loud pop filled the room, this time coming from his collarbone. This one didn't give way to any feelings of relief. It just *hurt*. Too long sitting in one position. Making a face as he slid his glasses back on, he brought a hand up to rub at the aching spot as he turned to head towards his quarters. As his first step away from the desk landed, he was hit with an immense shockwave that nearly caused him to fall over.

Shortly after, an unholy wailing filled the air, as though a banshee had decided to grab his head and scream straight into his ear. Running to the nearest window, he looked out over the grounds in hopes of seeing where it came from. Instead, he was met with the sight of a giant, black dome of energy shooting out from near the center of the Forbidden Forest, growing to a massive size in mere seconds. It came to a halt just before it reached the edge nearest the school, though it seemed to fluctuate slightly. It was pulsing.

Narrowing his eyes, Dumbledore turned and rushed from his office. Just as he left the door at the bottom, half the staff came running up to him, all talking at once. Dumbledore raised a hand to quiet them and, looking at each as he spoke, quickly instructed them. "Get the students to the back of the school. I do not want any of them in a position to see what is taking place in the Forest. I will explain later. I must hurry!"

McGonagall watched Dumbledore run off, a troubled look on her face. The times she could recall Dumbledore looking that frightened could be counted on one hand. Turning, she began barking out instructions

to the gathered staff members. It was going to be hard to drag the entire student body away from windows. Surely everyone in the whole of Hogwarts had been awakened by whatever the hell that thing had been.

The front doors of the school opened of their own accord as Dumbledore rushed toward them. As he got out, he could see no traces of the giant sphere that had been engulfing the Forest, though the damage was quite evident even from as far away as he was. Beyond the first few layers of trees, there was simply nothing remaining. The trees were gone, leaving nothing to indicate they had ever been there. The ground had been eaten away as well, leaving little more than kicked up dirt and mud to cover what had once been the Forest's floor.

Hagrid wasn't in his hut - he had passed the man en route down the stairs. He had told him what he had told the rest of the staff. As Dumbledore passed by the half-giant's hut and got to the edge of the Forest, he saw the one sight he had been praying not to see. He saw Harry. And, as he got closer, a cold feeling washed over him.

Harry was shambling forward and bleeding heavily from every part of his body that was visible. And quite a bit was visible, as his pajamas were badly shredded. His left arm was bent back at a distinctly incorrect way. But none of that is what made the headmaster of Hogwarts suck in a sharp breath. It was the boy's hair and eyes that made Dumbledore rush forward, pushing himself to move as fast as his old body would go.

Harry's hair and eyes were both as pure white as freshly fallen snow. There wasn't even any indication that Harry could see. It was as though the green from his other half had simply been bleached away. As Dumbledore ran up to the Ravenclaw, he could make out the sources of the bleeding. Deep gashes were carved into Harry's body at all angles.

Harry looked up at the headmaster. His mouth opened slowly, shaking as he tried to speak. But the only thing that came out was a dark mist. Drawing a rattling breath, Harry toppled forward. Dumbledore easily caught him, quickly scooping him up. Barely

taking a moment to look into what had once been the Forbidden Forest, he turned and started back up toward Hogwarts at an even faster pace than he had left it.

"What have you done?" He whispered, looking down at Harry's broken body. "What have you done?"

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## Chapter 15 – Infinitalis Navitas

"YOU COULD HAVE GOTTEN US KILLED!"

"Nothing would have happened if you would have just let me *finish*, damn it!"

"If you had finished, half of Hogwarts would have been sheared away! Look around you! Look at what's happened to this place!"

"Our magical core is *fine*. I made sure to it this time! The Armor did its job! We can awaken at any time!"

"No."

"No?"

"No. Unless you agree to stay dormant unless explicitly asked for assistance, I'll make sure I never wake up."

The creature of light glared at Harry. "You wouldn't dare."

Harry smirked. "Try me. I'd rather stay in a self-sustained coma forever than to risk having anyone be killed due to losing control again; due to *you* getting loose again!"

The creature narrowed its eyes. After a minute, it let out a frustrated growl and turned, heading towards the currently jet-black lake. "Very well. If you're going to be so bloody stubborn about it. But I'm warning you now - a day *will* come when you're going to need my power. And when that day comes, you can bet I won't give you access to it unless you accept that we're two halves of the same whole and must rejoin."

"I'll never do that." Harry stated, crossing his arms. "I'll get stronger on my own, using my own power. And when I get the Soul and create a new Philosopher's Stone and can reforge the Gauntlet, I'll suppress your presence forever."

The creature made a scoffing noise as it started to descend into the lake. "You talk big. But you need me. We're the same person. You're

nothing without me. I'm your fury. I'm your power. I'm the recklessness you need to successfully lay siege to the Citadel of Azkaban. Without me you *will* fail and people *will* die. Perhaps that's what it will take. Perhaps Voldemort or his minions killing our friends is what will force you to accept reality for what it is."

"I won't let anyone die." Harry argued. "I'll get stronger and protect all of them myself."

"And when you go on your bombing run for the Soul? What then? Will you have the whole raid follow you into the Citadel itself?" Asked the creature, stopping at around waist-high water to look over its shoulder. "They'll remain outside to keep whatever Tom throws at us at bay while *you* go for the gem. You can't protect everyone. This is a war. You must fight force *with* force sometimes. I'm sorry that it's come to this, you know. I truly am. Because I know what it's going to take for us to merge again."

"Nothing's going to happen." Harry said, turning away from the creature. His magical core's landscape looked like it had been razed and salted. All traces of plant-life were completely gone and the area looked just shy of being a complete desert. The only water that remained was in the horribly dark lake. "...I promise."

"Promises are always broken." Said the creature. And, before it completely vanished under the surface of the water, it added, "When our friends are killed and you lose all hope... I'll be there. Because if I don't fight, who will?"

Harry jerked his head around to argue, but the creature was gone. Its bright shine had been completely hidden by the water. Letting out a sigh, Harry sat down and closed his eyes. This was all so very, very wrong. Every stinking bit of it. Punching the dirt beside him, Harry glanced up at the overcast sky. Things were going to change. He was going to ensure they did. This had to stop. And the only way that was going to happen was from assaulting Azkaban. He had to put an end to the Altered. He had to get the Soul. He had to find a way to create a new Philosopher's Stone.

"Damn it all." He muttered. "I couldn't even stop myself. How am I going to stop anyone else?"

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"How is he?" Asked Dumbledore, walking back into the hospital wing. He had been back down to the edge of the Forest for the third time that hour. Just to check to see if anything was moving or seeking help. Unfortunately, he had seen nothing to raise his hopes in the least.

"He's alive." Madam Pomfrey said, her voice clipped.

On a nearby bed, Luna held a sobbing Tonks. Solieyu was pacing at the foot of the bed, looking furious. Across the room from the bed Harry was in, Malfoy and Pansy sat, talking quietly between themselves. Hermione and Ginny were across from the Slytherins. Dumbledore had thought it best to collect them on one of his trips out of the hospital wing. It had now been just over three hours since the incident. Thankfully, when he had brought Harry into the school, he had run into absolutely nobody. He wasn't sure where the staff had taken the students, but he was grateful that it was nowhere near the most direct route to the hospital wing.

Of course Madam Pomfrey was awake. Everyone in the school had been awakened by the blast. She had also expected who to see show up. She was, unfortunately, not let down. The minute that Dumbledore burst into the room, she began performing the first steps in healing Harry's broken body. His arm was moved back into the position it should have been and bound in place to heal better. By the time Dumbledore had actually gotten him onto a bed, she had started to clear the blood from the gashes in Harry's body, closing them one by one.

With the danger of death from blood loss out of the way, she and Dumbledore helped get him into a fresh pair of pajamas. Once stretched back out in bed, she had inspected both his hair and eyes carefully. The diagnosis she had given Dumbledore was grave - Harry had burned up almost ninety percent of his magical energy. His core was safe, but only just. Any further strain would have likely resulted in it fragmenting or being shattered outright.

From that point on, she had pulled up a chair to keep a watchful eye on Harry. Dumbledore told her that he wanted to go back to look at the Forest better now that Harry was in stable condition. Madam

Pomfrey had simply nodded as he turned to sweep out of the room. As he walked back through the empty corridors of the school, he asked the paintings to locate where the staff was, asking them to pass word on to McGonagall that he wanted to see her. At his command, over a dozen men and women left their frames to begin scanning Hogwarts. By the time he reached the bottom of the stairs, he had word that McGonagall would be waiting for him in the Entrance Hall by the time he got back in.

He didn't need to go very far into the Forest to see the damage. There was very little of it left intact. In an instant, Harry had wiped out over a dozen different communities of magical creatures. The power that must have taken almost frightened the old man. That Harry was capable of such devastation was something that he hadn't ever wanted to deem possible. He didn't want to know that Harry's destructive force was far greater than his little sister's could have ever hoped to have been. And yet here was proof of just that. Proof that he had failed to keep Harry from having to know such pain. Because he was sure that when Harry woke up, he would sink into depression. It was simply who he knew Harry to be.

After walking around and inspecting things closely, Dumbledore had turned to re-enter the school. As promised, McGonagall was waiting for him. She was quickly filled in on what had transpired and was asked to relay the information back to the staff. As for what the students were to be told... he hadn't decided. He said he was waiting to ask Harry what *he* wanted to be made public. If they were to cover the incident as an attack from Voldemort, then so be it. But they would wait to say.

McGonagall agreed and the two parted ways. But Dumbledore was not satisfied with his first trip into the Forest. Summoning his phoenix, he asked the song bird to take him to its center. Or, at least, where the center had once been. Fawkes had let out a melodic trill and, in an instant, had transported both himself and the headmaster to where he had wanted to go. It was no better. In fact, it looked even worse, if that was possible. The giant sphere of energy had dug out an enormous hole in the ground.



And so he had returned to the school, dismissing the phoenix to go and rest. Another burning day was rapidly approaching and he didn't want to cause any unneeded stress on his friend. And, as he stepped through the doors, he turned and sought out where he knew the Pit to be. Naturally, all of Harry's friends had gathered, finding Tonks almost hysterical. He had knocked on the door, which refused to allow him access despite the situation. Solieyu had answered. Dumbledore hadn't missed how everyone stayed stock still as he explained the situation. He then led the group up to the hospital wing.

No one was expecting Harry to wake up any time soon. No one was expecting him to talk about the incident once he finally did. So naturally, when Harry's eyes suddenly opened and he sat upright like some undead creature in a monster movie, it caught everyone off guard. When he exhaled, traces of a dark green mist slipped out from the sides of his mouth.

"He took over." Harry rasped. "He took over and there was nothing I could do. He wanted to force an overflow to see the range. I did everything I could to stop him. It wasn't good enough. He wanted to seek revenge on Aragog for chasing us out of the Forest years ago. We were intercepted by centaurs at one point. He warned them, but they wouldn't listen. I dunno if the one he attacked died after we left. I guess it doesn't matter. He's dead now. When Aragog presented himself, he called forth the Armor and invoked the Defaeco. He tried pushing every ounce of our energy into it. But I fought back. I held a small part at bay. It was too strong. If I had let go, half of Hogwarts would be missing right now. Half at least. He insisted our magical core is fine. I'm not so sure. It's a wasteland in there. But he's gone away now and I don't plan to let him out again. Things are going to change."

For awhile, no one said anything. They were all still shocked from Harry suddenly awaking, to say nothing of the speech he had promptly broken into. His voice had sounded ragged and weak, but the emotion in his words carried a lot of power to them.

"How are you feeling...?" Asked the headmaster, tentatively.

"If I may use harsher language than usually accepted, I feel like absolute shit." Harry stated. He glanced down at his bound arm. "...*That* was caused by the initial burst of energy when the backlash hit. The cuts in my body... I'm not entirely sure about. But it felt almost like..."

"Almost like what, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, moving closer.

"Like it was because... we were unprepared." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. "Remember the smoking guy from Hogsmeade? Let's... let's just say I know what that was now. I know what it means. I know what continued exposure means. I... really, really don't want to talk about it."

"So when the Sanctus Defaeco was used..." Dumbledore began.

"Everything in Aragog's lair was instantly killed. Disintegrated like everything else in the area, I'd wager. I felt every single thing in that place die. I know because the pain came back to hit me. Maybe that's what caused the cuts. But I knew when everything died. The creatures, the plant-life... everything." Harry explained. Then, almost to himself, he quietly murmured, "I'm glad I take that locket off at night now..."

"'Cuts' you call them." Madam Pomfrey muttered darkly, scanning Harry with her wand. "Some of those carved right into your bones, Potter. You're lucky you didn't lose any limbs."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. It was the Armor that kept me from dying. ...Which reminds me. Why do I have white hair hanging over my eyes?" Harry asked, bringing his good hand up to tug out a bit of hair to try and better look at it. It hung limp around his face, which made him look even stranger, given its usual tendency to stick up wherever it jolly well wanted to. "Hm. Side effect... must have been like our initial test of the Armor back at Number Twelve..."

"So." Came Malfoy's voice from across the room. "How long are you going to sit on your butt and heal this time?"

Solieyu rounded on Malfoy, wand drawn. But Harry's rasping laughter made him stop, turning to stare at his friend strangely.

"Not long." Harry said, smirking at the blond. "Just gotta not do magic for awhile. Or... run. Or... fly or much of anything else. I feel strong enough to walk a bit, though. Gimme about a day to sleep it off."

Malfoy returned the smirk. "I saw what you did out there. One way of clearing pests away."

"Indeed." Harry agreed, eyebrows raising. "Though I can think of a good number of less... violent... methods of removing them."

"You aren't... upset?" Dumbledore asked, his own eyebrows raising slightly.

"I'm regretful it happened. But I won't fall into depression over it, if that's what you mean. This has taught me something very important. We need to mobilize. We *need* to get Balthazar out of Azkaban and we *need* to do it as soon as we can." Harry said.

"It's very hard to tell who the devil you're looking at when your eyes are solid white, you know." Pansy said. "Turn your head more when you talk to people."

"Noted." Harry said. He started to roll his eyes before realizing that no one would be able to tell he was performing such a maneuver. "...Smart-aleck. Anyway, as I was saying - we need to get to work on attacking Azkaban."

"I've been speaking with Rufus." Dumbledore said. "I came to the conclusion a bit earlier than you seem to have."

"What did the Minister have to say?" Asked Harry.

"Just that he would gather the Aurors and talk it over with them, essentially. Brainstorming, I believe. He said he would get back to me by week's end. We will discuss the subject further then. So until that time, try not to worry yourself about it. You need to concentrate on healing." Dumbledore said.

"Roger that." Harry said. "So who saw?"

"I'm not sure. I was hoping to get your side on this. What do you want the cover story to be, Harry? Do you want to say Voldemort tried something or do you want the students to know the true story?" Asked Dumbledore.

"I'll tell them myself. At breakfast." Harry said. "I won't cover up my mistakes."

"You realize there could be a large outcry from parents, don't you?" Dumbledore said.

"To hell with the parents of soft children." Harry said, sneering slightly. "This is a war. If they don't want to see what their only bloody Anti-Altered, Anti-Voldemort weapon can do when pushed to his limits, they should remove themselves from wizarding society and live on as Muggles."

"A bit extreme, don't you think?" Dumbledore asked.

"Extremes are what's going to win us the war." Harry said, shrugging on the good side. "I'll rest after I explain what happened. Think I can go to the Pit after being helped to the Great Hall?"

"If you think you can stand and walk, you can rest wherever you want. So long as it's just that." Madam Pomfrey said. "And I only say this because I know you'd try getting out anyway if I didn't allow you to. And the last thing I want you to be doing is that shifting business of yours."

"Yeah, don't have to worry there. I'm not going to use the Armor for a good while. Not until I can tap into my magic without feeling worried about it." Harry said. He then glanced over to where Luna and Tonks were. "...You're being pretty quiet."

"Sorry." Tonks said.

Harry tilted his head. "You believe me, don't you? About not being able to control him? About this being out of my control? I don't *want* to be like this, Nym."

"I know." Tonks said, rubbing at her eyes. "But you have no idea how stressful it is to be your girlfriend. Especially on nights like tonight. I wake up to this hideous wailing noise, everything's rumbling, and you're not in bed. So I got up, ran around the Pit. You weren't anywhere. I went and got dressed as quickly as I could, then ran out in time to see that dome die down."

"I'm sorry, Nym. But if nothing else, this has forced me to focus better. Right now, the most important thing to do is to plan the attack on Azkaban." Harry said. "After I kill off all the Altered, I won't have *need* to use the Defaeco again. ...I hope..."

"You hope?" Dumbledore asked.

A shadow passed over Harry's solid-white eyes for a moment. "I... I just don't want to talk about it. I'm going to have to try and work something out. There was something out there that was..." He let out a frustrated sigh. "Let's just say the missing piece of my puzzle will come to me in time. I don't want to talk about it. Because if I start talking about it, my other half will inevitably get interested. I can't let that happen again. But... yes, I've got a second use for the Defaeco now. Let's leave it at that..."

"As you wish." Dumbledore said. "Shall we get going then? I can go and alert the staff that all is as back to normal as it ever is."

"I think Tonks should levitate me. Maybe bump me into a few doorways?" Harry said, smiling slightly.

"Oh, I intend to chew you out after you get better, rest assured." Tonks stated. "I'm just grateful you're *alive* right now."

"Hero Clause." Harry stated. "I have business to take care of yet."

"I thought you gave up on that hero angle." Solieyu said.

"Yeah, well... you'd get the feeling too if you were in my position." Harry said.

"Then I'm glad I'm not." Solieyu replied. "Well, let's go then. We can't expect the staff to hold back the school forever."

"The man has a point." Harry said, shifting around slightly. "Though if someone could bring me my robes, I'd really rather change into something less embarrassing if I'm to be in front of the whole school. Think my arm can handle me dressing myself?"

"It's up to you. If it were up to me, you'd be laying in bed and not doing *anything* for awhile." Madam Pomfrey said.

"Someone get me outta here before she hexes me to this bed." Harry said, glaring at the hospital matron.

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Some twenty minutes later and Harry was changed and downstairs in the Great Hall, waiting for the staff and students to arrive. It would take awhile. As far as he was aware, half of them were still in their night clothes. Harry was standing, though he had to lean back against the wall near the end of the Ravenclaw table to keep stable. His hair and eyes stood out against the black of his robes. It didn't look right and he knew it. He had caught a good look at himself in a reflection from one of the suits of armor along the way.

The non-Ravenclaws were all hovering somewhere near Harry, just in case he lost his balance or someone tried something when they finally arrived. Those from his own House were sitting at the end of the table, looking bored.

After awhile, McGonagall swept in. She was momentarily halted as she caught sight of Harry. He glanced her way, despite knowing no one would be able to actually tell, and muttered, "I'll be explaining."

"So Albus has told us." McGonagall said. "I can't wait to hear what you've done *this* time, Mr. Potter."

And with that, the head of Gryffindor headed up toward the staff table, where Dumbledore was already sitting. As the minutes passed, more staff members started to arrive. Shortly after they got there, students began to filter in. Needless to say, the general reaction to Harry's appearance was mostly the same. It probably didn't help that he was keeping as still as he could. It wasn't that he wanted to make himself seem intimidating, he just knew that if he tried much of anything, he

was likely to topple over. And that just wouldn't do. And since no one could tell his eyes moving, it seemed almost like he was petrified.

And while Harry was dimly aware of the murmur that grew louder as more and more people entered the room, his mind had gone off on a different path. He was wondering what the hell this meant in regards to Voldemort. He knew that Voldemort had eyes and ears inside the school. And, just like with the Armor and subsequent defense of Hogsmeade, Harry knew that word about the overflow would get back to the Dark Lord sooner or later. What would happen then was out of Harry's hands. He didn't think he was going to get any breaks, though.

When the Great Hall was almost completely filled, the headmaster stood up, clearing his throat. When the din died down, he surveyed the room before speaking.

"I know we have had a very exciting morning... but I do not believe any of you will be able to correctly guess *why*." He said.

Someone from the Slytherin table called out, "Obviously hasta do with Potter, doesn't it?!"

And then, from the Hufflepuff table, "Was there another attack?"

"Yes to the first question, no to the second." Dumbledore said, smiling cryptically. He then nodded, looking across the room at Harry. "The floor, as they say, is yours."

"*Fantastic*." Harry muttered. Taking a deep breath, he pushed himself away from the wall and, once he was sure his footing was solid, began to talk. "What happened to the Forbidden Forest was caused by me. I'm sure you all felt the shock wave and heard the noise. Did anyone see the explosion?"

"We did, Harry!" Called Dean Thomas. "...Blimey, that was *you*?"

"Figured the Gryffindors might." Harry said, nodding. "Yes, it was me. I take it we all remember what happened in Hogsmeade? The spell I created to destroy the Altered? What happened in the Forest was that spell pushed beyond its breaking point. That was a complete reversal of its power. I wasn't in full control at the time. For awhile now, I've

had a... split personality, if you could call it that. Sometimes it gains dominance. That happened earlier tonight. I'm not happy with it. I fought the whole way, trying to regain control. In the end, all I could do was ensure Hogwarts' safety. Because if I hadn't gained some semblance of control over the overflow, half of Hogwarts - and likely half of all of you - would be gone. Not simply dead. Just gone. As in not here anymore. Search the remnants of the Forest all you want. You won't find any life there now."

"So you really *are* dangerous!" Called a Gryffindor boy who looked fairly young. "The Prophet's been saying you're a dangerous weapon that's barely being controlled!"

"The Prophet isn't far from the truth." Harry said, grinning. "For years now I've fought Voldemort in *some* form or another. I've grown up to become an Anti-Voldemort weapon of sorts. I'm the only one who can stop him. I'm the only one strong enough to. I'm *pretty* sure I'm the only one insane enough to. Voldemort doesn't scare me. Voldemort is a sad, pathetic little man whose life is going to be snuffed out in the near future. I can't be sure of when, exactly, but if he's alive before I graduate, I'll eat my robes."

"So you're going to kill him...?" Asked one of the Ravenclaws.

"Not kill. Erase. Killing him brings the risk that he might come back. Everyone thought he was dead after he attacked me when I was a baby, remember? We all see how that went. He's used powerful magic on himself to ensure his survival." Harry explained.

"So what do you plan on doing?" Asked a first year Gryffindor girl.

"Not sure yet. Haven't gotten that far ahead yet." Harry said, shrugging. "More pressing matters at hand."

"More pressing matters?" Asked the girl.

"Azkaban." Harry stated.

There was a brief silence after that, broken by an older Slytherin boy laughing and asking, "And what do you plan to do? Lead an assault on a flying island that no one can pinpoint?"



"That's exactly what I plan." Harry stated. "Not to knock it out of the sky - I can accomplish that later. But Voldemort has something I want. And I fully intend to go and take it from him."

"You're suicidal." Said the Slytherin.

"No, I'm crazy. There's a difference." Corrected Harry, grinning wildly. "I've protected all of you people so far, haven't I? I don't intend to stop. I don't intend to lose. I don't intend to *die*. Let me just state this now - I know there are some in here who have contact with Voldemort, however indirect it might be. And I want you to go back to your Dark Lord and relay a message for me. I want you to tell him that I'll be paying him a visit in the near future. I want you to tell him that he can throw whatever he wants at me. I'll be ready. And I'll come out with what I go there for. He knows damn well what it is. And you can also tell him I know exactly where he's *keeping* it. He won't move it. He'll want to see me prove myself. It's the kind of person he is. So tell him everything I've told you. It won't matter one iota. I'm going to win this war and I'm going to erase him from existence in the process."

Harry turned then, walking with a slight limp towards the doors. As he did, he glanced towards Tonks and Solieyu and murmured, "Little help?"

As his friends got up, another Slytherin, a girl this time, called out, "You apparently can't even win a fight against your own split personality. How do you ever hope to beat the Dark Lord?! How could you possibly think that you'll win?!"

Harry grinned then, glancing over his shoulder. "Simple. Because I can't *lose*."

"Why?" Asked the girl.

Harry's hair and eyes both glowed a faint green for a moment as his crazed grin grew. "I'm the greatest hero that ever lived. That's why." Then, turning to Tonks and Solieyu, he nodded towards the door. "Let's go."

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Harry had stayed in the Pit the rest of the day. He figured he'd let the rumor mill spin, let the worst of it all pass, and *then* he'd rejoin the school. Maybe his hair and eyes would get back to normal again. To his annoyance, he wasn't able to use his admittedly rusty Metamorphmagus powers to switch them back to their proper colors. Most of his day was spent on the couch, gazing into the fire, eyes glazed over. As he sat and got his rest, people came and went, filling him in on what was going on in the outside world.

Dumbledore had also fire-called him an hour before dinner to say that he'd talked with the Minister over what had happened. Harry asked if he was going to get in trouble for what his other half had done. But Dumbledore shook his head, saying that Scrimgeour simply wasn't Fudge and that while the Prophet might spin a horror tale of what happened, the Minister stood by his friends. That had made Harry feel strangely relaxed. Perhaps it was finally having a Minister that he both liked and trusted. One that *understood*.

Tonks had stayed by his side for the better part of the day, skipping her own classes and only leaving to join the others in the Great Hall. Harry said it wouldn't do her good to sit and watch him stare at the fire *all* day. Tonks relented, but only under the condition that Harry also ate something. Harry agreed and, with a little effort, made his way to the dining room. He had asked Stargazer if he'd like to come down to join him, both for the company and to fill the beholder in on what was going on. Stargazer seemed a bit surprised to be asked, but joined Harry anyway.

It was an interesting, if somewhat messy, meal. Harry still couldn't use his left hand and Stargazer wasn't what one would call a clean eater. But it was fun and the two shared various stories from their lives as the night went on. Eventually, the mood came down again as Stargazer asked about Boris.

Harry told the beholder about how he met the little taipan and of the adventures they had gone on together, as well as of the snake's past with Jaeger Whitechapel. Stargazer bobbed his head in a sage nod as Harry spoke. He spoke of tales from old beholders who had come back to the Void with horror stories of the things they had seen. Stories of grizzled wizards who, unhappy with how their lives were

going, decided to experiment on other lifeforms. How those poor creatures had been mutated and bastardized to the point of being unrecognizable. He said that the snake had been wise to ask to be burned. It was one of a handful of ways to ensure that the body wouldn't come back should any spells have been put on it.

When the meal was over, Harry told the beholder he was going to go lay down. He asked that Stargazer let the others know when they got back. Stargazer agreed and flew back into his set of rooms through the hole in the roof. Letting out a sigh as he closed the bedroom door behind him, Harry stared across the room at the table Boris sometimes slept on.

"I wish you were still here." Harry murmured, crossing the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed. Carefully slipping in and laying down, he turned his head to the side. "...I could use some advice."

He needed someone to talk to about the Defaeco. He needed someone to talk to about what had happened out in the Forest. Someone who wouldn't be able to tell anyone else. Someone he could truly put his trust in. Bringing a hand up to his head, Harry laughed as the tears spilled. He knew what he could do once they were at Azkaban. He knew what his other half had tried to tell him prior to their venture into the Forest. He didn't want to know. But now it couldn't be helped. In fact, it seemed to be the only thing he could think about now. He knew how to solve his problems.

"Is it worth the price, Boris?" Harry whispered.

And obviously, although no reply ever came, Harry knew what the little taipan's answer would have been.

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## Chapter 16 – Mezza Voce

A few days after the event in Forbidden Forest and Harry was feeling back to normal. His hair and eyes were still irritatingly white, but his arm had healed and his magical core was nearly back to a hundred percent. It was about as much as Harry could have asked for, considering the situation. In that time, the Prophet had written an article on what had happened. Harry had been expecting that. He had also been expecting the inevitable spin on what had happened. He had expected to be made out as some kind of psychotic. And maybe that wasn't entirely false.

But that hadn't happened. Somehow, Scrimgeour had caught wind of the story and had intercepted it. The Minister had personally defended Harry and gave the true (if abridged) version of what had transpired.

He had said that Harry was the best hope the wizarding world currently had for defeating the Dark Lord. That he was trying new things out. Things that would assuredly lead to Voldemort's downfall. It wasn't a lie, really. Harry didn't *know* if the Defaeco was capable of stopping Voldemort. He was sure that if he purposely overloaded another one, Voldemort would probably sense the charge and escape before it happened anyway. The Defaeco was as it always was - a tool to destroy the Altered.

The Minister had also asked that the wizarding world put its faith in Harry. Because if they were to turn their backs on him now, he'd never be able to find a reason to continue through all the pain he had been suffering. It was a bit annoying, but the Minister had gone over each and every one of Harry's injuries in his interview with the Prophet. Harry knew it served a purpose, but having everyone with a subscription to the paper know how badly he had injured himself didn't seem a great way to build their confidence. Hermione had said it was just the opposite - that since Harry was able to survive such severe injuries, which were with him for the entire walk from where Aragog's lair had been to the edge of the woods - he had something in him that kept him alive. She told him that more than a few of her

friends had expressed shock that Harry was even up and moving so soon, let alone nearly back to full capacity.

Harry hadn't thought about it that way. He did seem to heal strangely fast when he wanted to. And he had certainly wanted to this time. He had briefly wondered if it wasn't because he was getting used to near-death injuries. *That* was a pleasant path of thought to walk down.

As the middle of the month rolled in, things at Hogwarts had almost returned to normal. As normal as they ever were, anyway. A few students had left due to the incident, a few of Voldemort's followers had mysteriously vanished, and a few howlers had been sent to Dumbledore. But aside from all of that, life continued as it always did, though Harry was finding his new hair and eye color to be a royal pain in the butt. He didn't like his hair hanging down over his eyes. But there was nothing he could do about it. It wasn't long enough to pull back. He had taken to simply tilting his head to one side as he wrote in class.

On the night of the 16th, Harry found himself lingering around the Pit. Dinner was going on in the Great Hall, but he didn't feel like going. It was a growing feeling that had been building up ever since the incident. He wanted to remain inside and somewhere he felt secure. He felt as though, at any given time, someone was going to try and curse him when his back was turned. He had tried to hide his paranoia, though everyone suspected something was eating away at him.

Usually, at least once every few days, Harry found himself alone in the Pit and talking to the fire. It helped to get things out of his system. A few times, Stargazer had floated down to keep him company. And while it was weird to have what essentially amounted to a giant floating eyeball with teeth hovering next to his head, Harry didn't mind. Stargazer rarely talked when it happened. Harry just figured he was being polite, which was a strange enough thing to think about for any length of time.

He knew Boris' spirit wasn't going to suddenly pop up in the flames and give him advice, but it still helped to talk. And any time others were around and he needed to get something out of his system, he

merely slipped into Parseltongue. It drew the occasional odd look, but everyone seemed to accept it for what it was.

But this night felt different. He didn't want to sit and talk to the fire. He wanted to sit and talk to something more animated. Glancing up to the hole in the ceiling, Harry called out, "I'm going out for awhile."

"Where are you going?" Came the beholder's voice.

"Downstairs. I'll be back in an hour or so, if that long." Harry said, slipping his hands into his pockets.

"Understood. I'll let the others know." Stargazer said.

Harry smiled crookedly before shifting. Surprisingly, he hadn't been afraid to even attempt to use the Armor again. Everyone seemed to think he had planned to stay away from both it and the Defaeco after what had happened. But even through the generally calm exterior he kept up, he knew what had to be done. He had to keep getting stronger. If his other half was right about anything, it was that their light needed to be as pure as it could be by the time they laid siege to the Citadel.

By his count, he had been down to look in on Demetra Aethon somewhere around a dozen times now. He had only stopped in to speak with her once or twice. Usually he stayed shifted and merely observed. There was no real point to it, other than the fact that it still bothered him that she would attack Solieyu so randomly. He refused to believe she was evil. She had been manipulated - brainwashed - into her way of thinking. Harry had long since realized that most religions operated that way. Scare the masses into believing one thing because if they didn't, terrible things would happen. A simple code of ethics blown out of proportion.

He wasted no time in shifting back in and kneeling down in front of Demetra. It took the girl a few moments to realize she wasn't alone. When she did, she glanced up. At first, she seemed caught off-guard by Harry's appearance. But when she realized who it was, the light left her eyes again.

"Back again?" She asked, her voice scratchy still.

"Mm." Came Harry's quiet reply.

"Still not going to kill me?"

"No."

A scoff, followed by, "Then why *are* you here?"

"The same reason as ever. I want to talk." Harry stated.

"So talk." Demetra muttered, letting her eyes slip shut.

Harry sighed. It was obvious there was little fight left in the vampire hunter. She had been shackled up for awhile. And from the look of it, she was only getting the minimum treatment necessary to remain alive. And while a part of Harry was glad to see her suffering for what she had done to Solieyu, another part hated it. It was that part, he had decided, that had kept him going for so long. Fighting for those who he *shouldn't* care about. Trying to save people who didn't necessarily deserve saving.

He had come down this night for a reason, though. It wasn't the usual idea of meandering back-and-forth on tap for the evening. Closing his own eyes for a moment, Harry blew out a long breath before murmuring, "I forgive you."

"...What?" Asked Demetra, head tilting up slightly.

"I forgive you. For attacking Leon." Harry said. "Because as much as a part of me wants to see you sit and suffer for hurting him... I can't. Whatever Scrimgeour has planned in regards to a place to hold criminals in lieu of Azkaban, it has to be better than this. And while I fully intend to drop Azkaban back into the ocean at some point, that won't be for a good amount of time. You need to be moved to a more humane location."

"I don't want your pity." Demetra muttered darkly.

"Too bad for you, then." Harry said. "Unlike you, I won't judge a whole group when I should be looking at people individually. But I still have no doubt that Iscariot is full of a bunch of unmitigated bigots who

brainwash those under them. People who've probably been brought up to think like their elders do. Just like the children of Death Eaters, who hate anyone but purebloods like themselves. But not all the children of Death Eaters will follow in their parents' footsteps. Just like you don't have to keep following the commands sent down to you from Iscariot. Let me help you."

"Vampires are sins against humanity and God. They must be destroyed." Demetra argued, her voice nearly giving out. After stopping to clear her throat, she continued, "It is not a matter of brainwashing or feeling obligated. It is simply the truth. Vampires are unclean and must be killed. Only then can we start to reclaim the planet."

"Let me ask you a question, then." Harry said.

"What?"

"You keep bringing up 'God' - I assume Iscariot follows the teachings of the Christian lord?"

"You assume correctly. What of it?"

"How can someone who blindly follows religion even accept magic? Isn't that an offense to your 'God'?" Harry asked.

Demetra was silent at this, though she was gritting her teeth.

"No reply?"

"It is complicated." Demetra said.

"What've I got to do that's better than listening? By all means..." Harry said, gesturing for Demetra to continue.

"...You would not understand even if I explained." Demetra said, glancing off.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "In other words, you haven't a decent explanation to give. There's a double standard. Magic-users are fine so long as they aren't vampiric in nature. What a truly pathetic



existence you Iscariot people must lead. You say you don't want my pity? I say you aren't worthy of my pity. You say Voldemort is an abomination and your hatred seems pure, yet you act just like he does. You deserve forgiveness for your crimes, but I don't believe you can be truly saved."

"God will save us all, in the end." Demetra said, smirking.

"God is dead. And your people are the ones who killed him." Harry stated, standing up. "You'll not find the salvation you're waiting for. You'll rot in the ground like everyone else. Your precious God won't stop Voldemort. I will. I guess that makes me greater than your God."

"I won't listen to you blaspheme in front of me." Demetra growled.

Leaning over, Harry put his hand under Demetra's head, grabbing her by the chin and forcing her to look up at him. Once she had, her venomous glare leveled at him, he brought his hand back and slapped her. And while the stunned silence that followed only lasted a second, it had the impact he had wanted.

"You think you're better than God, Potter!" Demetra yelled, struggling furiously against her shackles. "You'll die, just like everyone else who tries to kill Voldemort! You give hope to countless people! What's going to happen to them if you die! Huh! Has the thought of dying even crossed your mind, Potter! How many will feel the pain of your death! How many will be left without a direction to go in when their *glorious* leader figure has fallen! How many will take comfort in the nearest thing they can find! What are you going to do if they join the enemy, Potter? What happens if they cut themselves off from the rest of the world? What happens if they give up all hope!"

Harry knelt again and, with a single sentence, managed to halt the girl's struggles. "This anger can't bring your parents back."

"Don't you talk about my parents." Demetra said, refusing to meet Harry's gaze anymore.

"Killing vampires won't slake your thirst. It won't quiet the rage. It won't bring them *back*, Demetra. I took the time to find out more about you. I know your past. I know what happened. And I'm sorry."

Harry said, his voice soft. "If you really want to exact your revenge, you should be fighting the man who killed them. Not the ones he has under his control."

"Shut up." Demetra whispered.

"I know you were just a little girl when it happened. I know he left the children alive. And I know the church took you in. What happened from then on is a bit of a blur. But here you are, lying about your age just to get closer to a vampire who had nothing to do with your parents' deaths." Harry said. "What did they *do* to you, Demetra?"

"They saved me." Demetra said, though her voice sounded utterly miserable. "They gave me a home when I had lost mine. They offered comfort when I thought I'd never know it again. And in return, I did as they asked."

"No matter the cost?"

"No matter the cost."

"...Before I go, I want you to know one thing." Harry said.

"What?" Mumbled the girl.

"I'll get revenge for each and every person that's been killed by Voldemort. Because I'm strong enough to face him. I'm strong enough to fight him. I'm strong enough to *kill* him. I won't lose, Demetra. And I'll prove to all those offering me their faith that I'll come through in the end. I won't leave them to suffer. Unlike your God, who will never answer your prayers, you can depend on other people. So believe in me. Because sometimes I lose that faith in myself and need to know it still exists in others. We'll be attacking Azkaban soon. And once I collect the two remaining things I need from the island, Voldemort's time is numbered. Until then, I plan to try my damndest to stop him at every turn."

"No matter the cost?" Whispered Demetra.

"No matter the cost." Harry stated, leaning forward to wrap his arms around the girl. Demetra froze at this, only her eyes moving to look aside.

"What are you doing?" She asked, confusion evident in her hoarse voice.

"Giving you something new to believe in." Harry said, moving away and getting to his feet again. "Something tangible. Because while I'll see to it that you get locked up for your crimes, I'll also ensure it's a fair amount of time. And I'll promise you this as well - the world will be a better place when you get out. Because by then, Voldemort will be long gone and I'll be strong enough to ensure that no one tries to take his place."

"What, then, will ensure *you* don't?" Asked Demetra.

"Everyone around me." Harry murmured, smiling. "Amazing how much one can be affected by the slightest bit of caring. Goodnight, Demetra. I'll be seeing you again in the future."

With that, Harry shifted. But, like last time, he remained in place and simply watched to see what the girl's reaction would be. But unlike the tears that spilled the last time, there was nothing to see this time. And in a way, that made Harry happy. He had given her something to think about. He had offered her an alternative. It was just a matter of time to see if she decided to take him up on it.

Taking one step to the left, he got on a wave. It didn't lead anywhere he was needed. He just wanted to fly around the school a little to unwind. He knew trying to argue the existence of a god with any hardcore believer was a losing battle. The key was to dig around that faith to expose any weaknesses. And Demetra Aethon had plenty. A blind attack on her village by Voldemort a few months before the Dark Lord had been nearly killed by his own spell rebounding on him had left a few dozen orphans. It was all in an attempt to help extend the reach of Voldemort's dark grip. He was seeking to expand his territory, so to speak. To do that, he had to make it known that his word was law and that anyone he didn't deem fit to live would be slain without question.

Harry couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that the hug he had given Demetra had been the first she'd received since her parents were alive.

And there was something phenomenally depressing about that.

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At the same time, on the flying island of Azkaban, Voldemort was gazing out the window of his quarters. The night was perfectly dark without a trace of wind. The Dark Lord had been spending a lot of his time locked away, researching. So Harry thought he could waltz into his Citadel and wreck the place, destroy his creations, and drop the island back into the sea, did he?

A smirk crossed Voldemort's face. How very, very wrong Harry would find himself. He was fully expecting the attack to happen within a few months. If it didn't, that was fine as well. The plan could be executed quickly at any time. But the wait would surely irritate him. He was, if nothing else, a man who absolutely hated to wait for things. But this wait did provide him with one positive result. It allowed him to go over what he had heard of Harry destroying the Forbidden Forest. Several of his followers' children within the school's walls had abandoned Hogwarts, preferring to remain at home and be trained to one day serve under his power just as their parents did.

It was quite an interesting oddity, if what he had been told had been true. And, given that he had freely looked around in the heads of his Death Eaters as they related the stories, he knew it was. Perfect little Harry Potter was dealing with dark magic of the highest caliber. A black dome formed from pushing his Sanctus Defaeco past its safety limits. An aura of purification turned into an aura of destruction with a mere thought.

He had been in Hogsmeade the night his Altered had attacked. He had seen the pure incarnation of Harry's so-called trump card. In his mind's eye, he had pictured what it must have looked like inverted and tearing apart everything in its path. It both amused and concerned the Dark Lord, as it meant he had a problem on his hands. If Harry were pushed to his limits, his Citadel and everything on it

faced the very real danger of being destroyed. Or worse. And the 'or worse' part was what had been bothering Voldemort the most.

He had heard that nothing had been left of the creatures in the Forest. He had seen one of his spies get reduced to a near-comatose state for a short time following being within the Defaeco. That meant that it did something to darkness itself, and all Voldemort could think was that it was trying to rip it out. The Dementors, and the Altered in particular, were almost completely molded from dark magic. Only their hearts showed any signs that they were once human. Twisted and cursed to forever guard the prison of Azkaban, forced to obey whoever controlled it.

The Dementors easily fell to the Defaeco. But what of its other effect? And what would happen to a human with a darkened soul if exposed to it for an extended period of time? Voldemort had his theories, but he was never one for that way of thinking. He much preferred the practical approach. And so he sat in his quarters and planned his next attack. The Altered would be on hand in force. But his Death Eaters would be leading the charge. The lesser ones, of course. The ones he deemed to have little to no real use to him. Oh, some of them were plenty strong as far as magical capabilities went. But their constant toadying drove him mad. There was a right way to grovel and there was a wrong way to grovel and those idiots had never grasped the proper way to do it.

And so they would either be reduced to a smoldering wreck like his spy had been or, if the Dark Lord's calculations were correct...

Smirking, Voldemort turned away from the window, crossing his quarters and sitting down at his desk. Harry Potter was dealing with things he would regret. Voldemort was going to ensure that. He would force the boy to see the true terror of his little trump card. And if he played his cards right, it would cause Harry to, at the very least, delay the assault on the Citadel. The more time Voldemort had to prepare, the better the defenses would get.

He had already assumed that they would arrive via broomstick or something similar. It was the only real way to get to the island. The biggest landing points were in the courtyard and just outside the

twisted ramparts. The courtyard would make for the easier of the landing points. Voldemort had no doubt that Harry would be rousting a veritable army to come with him. And so he had made sure to instruct his Altered to dig their hive upward. They would break through into the courtyard from underneath and swarm the place in a matter of seconds. That would cut down on a good number of intruders, he was sure. Harry wouldn't be able to use his little spell for a few seconds. And that was all he needed to make the first strike.

And then, of course, there were his newest minions. He was planning something special in regards to the vampires and the part they would play. His contact with their clans had seemed quite interested in the proposal. Voldemort knew Harry's friends would naturally come along for the ride unless he were to knock them out, which was unlikely. So he was making plans to drop a little surprise on them. Those who survived the first wave would likely not make it through the second. His Death Eaters would strike at the same time as the vampires, of course.

As for Harry... well, he would let Harry do as he wished. The Soul of Balthazar was no longer needed. The Orb was sustaining the island quite well now that it was fully charged. The Orb would remain in its chamber. From the random jolts of magic he had felt coming from the room every so often, he assumed that the withered old ghost kept within had been making contact with Harry. And if the Soul was calling out to someone, that meant one thing.

Harry had the Gauntlet of the Magi and was attempting reconstruction.

And Voldemort was going to help him do it.

It amused him to think that Harry truly believed that reforging such an old relic would be enough to stop him. Harry was going to have to learn how to redo everything he had learned about magic. The Gauntlet would ensure that the boy's wild magic would be controllable, yes. It didn't mean that it would be instantaneous. Nor did it mean that Harry would be able to figure out a way to even kill Voldemort. Whatever Harry did, Voldemort could easily counter.

And it didn't matter that he was expecting his children to die. The Altered, while a highly amusing experiment, had proven far less

useful than he had expected. He had simply made a mistake, something he rarely admitted to. But he had a contingency plan. He had already sent his Death Eaters out to round up all the materials he would need. If Harry was going to kill his Dementors, he would find a more... tangible... form of darkness. One that would invoke a greater fear than even the Dementors could invoke. In addition, he had one more trick up his sleeve in regards to his dark children. They were almost finished. And once they were, he was going to send one out into the field to test its resilience.

The only problem he foresaw was getting the attention of Sergei Wagner before he was ready. If Wagner were to hear word of Voldemort's plans, there would be complications. His Death Eaters would easily fall to Wagner's power. But Voldemort knew that Wagner mostly kept to his own city. If he remained far enough outside that range, he should be perfectly fine.

With a dark chuckle, Voldemort finished writing the letter he had been working on. Lucius was currently one of his men out in the field, getting his plan underway. Lucius was one of the few he truly trusted, despite the rest of the man's family betraying him. It had only caused the blonde man to double his efforts in regards to serving Voldemort. And it had turned an average Death Eater into one of his most powerful.

The letter simply stated that Lucius could begin digging. Whether or not Harry succeeded in both assaulting Azkaban and destroying its residents, it was always good to have a surprise. And Voldemort did love dropping surprises on people. Their screams were always such music to his ears.

Getting to his feet, he once more crossed his quarters, heading towards a fierce-looking hawk that was perched on one of the windowsills. Attaching the note to his leg, Voldemort sent the bird out into the still night.

Harry would attack. And if he wasn't killed outright, he would provide Voldemort with an even greater amusement. Because while Harry was relearning everything he thought he knew, Voldemort would send his surprise out into the world. The Gauntlet was insignificant to him.

The Dark Lord did not fear an ancient relic that, upon its forging, had immediately killed the one trying to wear it. He knew that Harry would survive. He was like a cockroach in that respect. Nothing seemed to be able to kill the boy.

And yet it was always such fun stomping on them and seeing how much they could be put through before finally falling for good. Voldemort fully intended to put Harry through the worst experience in his life. No one defied Lord Voldemort and got away with it. Because while he was perfectly willing to sacrifice a useless gem and a horde of rejects in the attack on his Citadel, he wasn't going to let Harry go away thinking he had claimed victory. He was going to steal Harry's happiness away from him once and for all. And if that final push didn't send him over the edge, it would at least set him back even further than resurrecting the Gauntlet was going to.

"Enjoy your holidays, Harry Potter." Voldemort whispered into the silence of the night. "I will be waiting. I will know the moment you leave Hogwarts. And I will kill everyone you let out of your sight for even the briefest of moments. Any victory you find in this place will be a hollow one. So come to me and show me your resolve. Fight a losing battle. Leave knowing you have failed to protect those around you. Enjoy your holidays, Harry Potter. Because it will be the last time I allow you to be happy."

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## Chapter 17 – Crescendo

A man in deep blue robes strode through a dank corridor. The chill wind that blew through was barely acknowledged by the man. He had business to attend to. Ur'terash was never what one would call warm or inviting. In fact, it was ensured that it remained just the opposite. Visitors were not welcome here. The reach of the underground city extended in all directions for countless miles. There were numerous entry points, all of which were closely guarded.

One of those entrances had had a group of men in white masks snooping around it. It wasn't the first time the guards had caught sight of them. Foreigners. Outsiders. Death Eaters.

The corridor came to an end, opening to a massive, circular room. In the center was a throne raised high above the ground, steps leading up to it from all sides. And on the throne sat a tall, lanky man in tattered robes, his face completely obscured by his hood.

Walking up the steps, the man dropped to one knee. "Sir, we've seen Voldemort's men scouting the area again. What orders should I give my squad?"

When the man on the throne responded, it was in a thick, German accent. "Track them, but do not let yourselves be seen. Observe, but do not interfere. Follow until you have seen what they are after. Only then should you return to tell me of the news."

"Yes, sir."

"And Calvanas?"

"Sir?"

Red eyes shone from the blackened depths of the hood. "If they disrespect the earth in any way, see to it that they are buried deep within it."

The other man, Calvanas, smirked. "Yes, my lord."

"Go. I will not have that man desecrate the tombs of my people." Muttered the man on the throne. "No one should disrupt those fortunate enough to remain dead."

Calvanas got to his feet and, with a bow, turned to leave. The man on the throne watched him exit. This would not go unpunished. Voldemort was dealing with powers he would have done well to avoid. But the die had been cast now. And despite the hatred building, he knew what would have to be done if the so-called Dark Lord advanced any further. He did not want to associate with the outside world. But, if it came to it, that was exactly what he would do. The dead would be respected. And if Voldemort wished to go against that, he would make more trouble for himself than he ever deemed possible.

No one angered Sergei Wagner. And those who defied him would meet with a fate far worse than the release death would bring.

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Harry Potter was nervous.

Despite having faced down countless threats and becoming a considerable one himself, he was still nervous. Christmas was rapidly approaching and while he knew what he wanted to give to Tonks, he wasn't sure he could. He had spent a lot of time talking about it with the only one he could. But that hadn't helped very much. In fact, it left him far more worried than he had been before.

On the up side, his hair and eyes were finally getting their color back. His hair was now a dark shade of grey. His eyes were taking a bit longer, being a hazy, dull green that was slowly building back up. It was nice to have people know when he was glancing their way. He had grown quite annoyed with having to turn his head every time he wanted someone to know he was addressing them.

And through all his worrying and healing, he was upset by something far greater. A few days before Christmas, Balthazar had contacted him once again. It hadn't been good. The ghostly man had said that he'd grown even weaker - that Harry had to hurry. That had left Harry in a near-constant state of anxiousness. He was forcing his mind to

think of every possible thing that could happen during an assault on Azkaban. He wasn't liking the results that came back.

There was obviously the immediate threat of Dementors of both flavors no matter where they landed. There would also likely be a large collection of Death Eaters lurking about. Then there were the prisoners that remained chained up down below. If they were told they would be freed if they held Harry's side off, they would probably charge into the fray unarmed. It would be worse if their wands were returned, though, half-crazed as they all surely had to be.

Harry knew the vampires were on Voldemort's side and wasn't ruling out the possibility that they would have a squad or two on the Citadel. Vampires would pose an interesting challenge. The only real exposure he had had to a vampire's true powers were when Solieyu was on the verge of madness. And if that was any indication, the vampiric force could be the single most dangerous thing on the island. At least with Voldemort, Harry knew he could match the Dark Lord's power. He was confident that he could bring any confrontation with Tom Riddle to a complete standstill.

Harry had asked Dumbledore if the Order had heard any more from Snape on who was siding with Voldemort. But, aside from some project that Voldemort had sent a group away on, there had been no news. Harry didn't like that. He had asked if Snape had access to the knowledge of what that project was. Unfortunately, he didn't. Voldemort was keeping his lips shut on the matter. Harry couldn't help but wonder what his nemesis had up his sleeves.

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"Stop pacing." Malfoy grumbled from one corner of the room. "You're going to wear a hole in the floor."

"He did this before the Yule Ball as well." Solieyu responded, leaning against the back of the couch.

"He always has to do something show-offish, doesn't he?" Asked the blonde, setting his book down.

"If he wasn't, he wouldn't be Harry Potter." Solieyu said, shrugging.

"Stifle it, henchmen." Harry growled, turning to glare at each of them. "Are we sure it's all ready? That we have everything planned out? No surprises, right?"

"Potter, calm the hell down." Malfoy drawled. "The decorations are fine, the beholder knows not to come unless there's obvious fighting going on, and you've been practicing your little stunt for ages. Nothing's going to happen. So for once in your damned life, would you sit down, shut up, and *stop worrying* about every minute detail?!"

Solieyu bit back a laugh as Harry leveled a withering glance at the Slytherin.

But he was right, of course. Harry blew out a sigh and turned to sit on the couch. The Pit was as decorated as it had probably ever been. A large Christmas tree stood in one corner, there was tinsel strewn all around the ceiling, presents were piled everywhere, and a few more chairs and little tables were set up in the areas around and behind the couch. They were to be playing host to a party. The family members of everyone who regularly visited the Pit would be dropping by, save for the Weasleys. They would be spending Christmas at their home, as per usual.

Still, it was going to hopefully be a fun night. Harry was slightly more confident about what he had gotten Tonks. The Grangers would be fun to watch. And Lupin... well, he was a different story. Harry had his own machinations for the werewolf. Harry had, during one of the few times he truly allowed himself to relax and zone out, figured out what the devil had been going on with the man. How it had slipped him for so long was beyond his grasp. It was blatantly obvious. And Harry was going to figure out a way to call him out on it. All in all, it promised to be a fun time for all. It was the first time so many outsiders had been allowed into the Pit. But they were all coming via fire, including Hermione's parents, which was sure to be an interesting experience all its own. Harry made sure to have a bucket placed nearby. Just in case.

The girls were off getting changed into their party clothes. Harry wanted there to be some kind of formality to it. No reason, really. He just wanted to present his quarters in a proper manner. He was,

essentially, inviting people over to his house. Dobby had assured him that the house elves would be on standby for whenever they wanted to eat. It was good, Harry sometimes thought, to be on such good terms with the house elves.

He had invited Dumbledore, but the headmaster had declined, saying he and the staff would be celebrating in their usual manner. Harry just took this to mean a bit of wine (or worse) would be imbibed while Order business was discussed.

Harry had decided to slick his hair back for things. He had asked both Solieyu and Malfoy for advice on how to achieve the look he was going for. It took a few minutes, but he was happy with the results. It wasn't as fancy as his frosty blue Yule Ball hair was, but he had had quite enough of light-colored hair recently. His was just a shade lighter than it should have been. No one else noticed, but he did. His eyes were also back to normal, for which he was glad. So far, he hadn't heard a peep from his more violent half, for which he was grateful. The last thing he needed was to have an identity crisis around his friends' parents.

The door to the Pit finally opened, with Luna, Hermione, Tonks, and Pansy entering. All the girls save for Pansy were in dresses and had their hair done up in some manner. Pansy chose a more masculine approach to the formal attire thing, wearing an outfit and styling her hair in a similar manner to the way it had been at the Yule Ball. It looked good on her, Harry decided. He wasn't sure if Luna or Hermione could pull that kind of look off. Tonks probably would, though, given her powers.

"Good evening, ladies." Harry said, smiling slightly as he got back up. "Just in time. The fireplace should be spitting out people any minute now."

"Always cutting it close, women are." Malfoy dryly commented. Hermione and Pansy both turned to glare at him. Luna was quickly at Solieyu's side, asking him how she looked. Tonks, meanwhile, was fixing Harry was a strange look.

"Yooooou are hiding something from me." She declared.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Harry stated, blandly.

"Ooh, you drive me crazy sometimes. You know that, right?" Tonks huffed.

"It's his speciality." Pansy said, cocking her only visible eyebrow.

"Anyone nervous?" Harry asked.

"I am. I hope my parents get here alright." Hermione said, gnawing at her lower lip.

"Dumbledore said he was going to assist bringing them and taking them. They'll be fine. A bit nauseous, sure, but..." Harry trailed off, smiling crookedly.

When the clock struck six, the flames in the fireplace flared up. Dumbledore's head appeared in them, looking slightly amused. "Ah, excellent. Everyone is there. Are you all ready? I have your families assembled."

"Bring them through, then!" Harry said, grinning.

Narcissa Malfoy was the first to enter, landing quite gracefully despite looking highly annoyed at the method she had to use to arrive. Her son was soon by her side, muttering under his breath about finding a cleaner method of getting about.

Luna's father was the next to pop out. He was an odd man, though it was readily apparent that, no matter what her mother was like, there was no way Luna hadn't inherited her old man's sense of fashion.

Solieyu's mother came after that. She seemed to Floo about as well as Harry and nearly toppled over when she came out. Solieyu was quick to catch her, though.

"Thank you." Maria said, making a face. "Never did like doing that..."

Andromeda followed, with Lupin shortly behind her. The two headed towards Harry and Tonks as Dumbledore brought the Grangers through. They did look a little green, Harry admitted. He nodded

toward the bucket nearby, but Dumbledore shook his head, that look of faint amusement still in his eyes.

"Well then! Harry, I believe that is everyone, is it not? Will that be all?" Asked the headmaster.

"I think so. Thanks for getting them all here safely." Harry said.

"My pleasure. I will return in two hours. Until then, I believe I will round the staff up. Pomona is bringing the sweets again and I have a bet with Minerva over whether or not they will change poor Filius' hair white again." Dumbledore said, turning and vanishing back into the fire. After a few seconds of violent crackling, the flames changed from green to their usual colors.

"So..." Harry began, glancing around. "Thank you all for coming. The last few years, Christmas has been... scattered, as best. I thought it would be nice to collect everyone here, where I could be sure they were safe."

"Where exactly is 'here'?" Asked Luna's father, Xenophilius.

"My private quarters within Hogwarts." Harry explained. "I found this place some time ago and we've been using it as our own little base of operations, as it were."

"I see, I see..." Xenophilius said, nodding slowly.

"You know," Lupin said, raising an eyebrow, "You have an odd gleam in your eyes, Harry. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were up to something."

"*SEE?*" Tonks cried, pointing accusingly at Harry. "I was thinking the same thing! I know he's hiding something!"

"Merely what I got you for Christmas, Nym." Harry replied, smiling cryptically.

"You're intolerable sometimes." Tonks stated, sticking her tongue out.

"I love you, too." Harry said, rolling his eyes. Clearing his throat, he motioned towards the dining room. "Dinner will be in there just as soon as everyone's recovered from Floo travel. Hating it myself, I fully understand needing a bit to get one's head back on straight. Though with me, it's usually needing to fix my kneecap..."

Suddenly, Pansy let out a little surprised squeak. Everyone looked over to see her dodging a green, flying thing that was trying to hover directly over her. "Potter, what the devil *is* this?!"

Lupin snorted suddenly, as did Hermione.

"Oh lord." Tonks muttered, bringing a hand up to her face. "Harry, where did you get that? *Why* did you get that?!"

"What?! Fred and George thought flying mistletoe would be a good idea!"

"Potter, I swear, if you don't get this thing away from me..." Pansy yelled, trying to smack the mistletoe away from her.

"Oh, very well. But only until after dinner. It's charmed not to go doing things it shouldn't, though." Harry said, drawing his wand and zapping the green plant, causing it to fall to the floor.

Pansy scowled before flattening her suit down and making sure her hair was still as it should have been.

Lupin chuckled. "It's good to know that the Marauder sense of humor isn't in any danger of dying."

"Someone has to carry on the fine traditions." Harry stated. "I think you should officially dub them as Marauders, Moony. It'd be the best gift you could give them."

"I was thinking the same thing. Then they'd throw some harmless-looking thing at me and turn me into a duck or something. So if I do, it'll be through mail." Lupin said.

"A wise plan indeed." Harry said. Then, turning to address his guests, he asked, "Is everyone doing okay?"



"Aside from feeling on the verge of sneezing?" Narcissa muttered under her breath.

"Turn your nose down more often and it wouldn't happen." Andromeda muttered under *her* breath.

"Hermione, are your parents doing alright?" Luna asked.

"We're fine." Said Mr. Granger. "Though I cannot imagine traveling like that all the time."

"Believe me, sir - I can't either." Harry said. "Everyone good for food, then? Presents will come afterwards. I need a bit in my stomach, else it's going to run away from me before I can give Nym her present."

"What could you possibly be so nervous over?" Tonks asked. "You've already proposed to me."

"You'll see." Harry said, nudging the girl lightly. "You're gonna love it. I promise."

Harry started moving then, escorting his guests into the dining room, which he had asked Dumbledore to magically extend for the occasion. Everyone had arrived safely. That was one worry down. Now he just had to worry about not only eating, but keeping it down.

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When dinner had ended, Harry hung back, giving a strange smile when Tonks asked why. Giving quick nods to Malfoy and Solieyu, Harry waited for the room to clear out before quietly calling Dobby's name. As the food on the table vanished, the little house elf popped into the room. Harry stood, walking over and kneeling by Dobby.

"Is Harry Potter still nervous?" Asked the house elf.

"I am." Harry said. "Are you sure it will work?"

"Humans is not so different from house elves where it is counting most, sir." Dobby said, offering a reassuring smile. "Harry Potter will be doing fine."

"I wish I were that confident." Harry said.

"Once you is entering the Spectrum, you will be doing fine." Dobby said, nodding his head quickly. "Now Harry Potter should be hurrying, sir! It is the best time to be doing what you is to be planning! The house elves will be busying themselves in the cleaning of dishes. There is an hour before we is to be starting to sweep the castle for its nightly cleaning!"

Harry nodded slowly, getting back up. "Thanks, Dobby. For everything. The training, the help with this..."

"Dobby is happy to be helping Harry Potter out, sir." Said the house elf. "And Harry Potter, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Good luck." Said Dobby, popping back out again.

Harry smirked, turning and heading for the door. As he reached for the knob, he took a deep breath. Pulling the door open, he found Malfoy on one side and Solieyu on the other, keeping close watch.

"Got the jitters out?" Solieyu whispered quickly.

"Yeah." Harry murmured back. "Gotta do it quick or I'll lose my nerve, though."

The parents were loitering around the couch, talking more about the Pit itself and what would have to be an inevitable attack on Azkaban. Only Luna and Hermione were standing near their parents. The others were clustered near the back, talking about what they had gotten their loved ones for Christmas.

As Harry crossed the room, a bright flare of light erupted, causing all eyes to turn to him. Now in the Patronus Armor, he strode up to Tonks, a grin splitting his face.

"Harry? What...?"

"Let me show you what I see." Harry said softly, reaching out and grabbing Tonks' hands.

"What you see? Harry, wh--" Tonks began. She was silenced as the light from Harry seemed to start bleeding over onto her own arms. "...Harry? What's going on?"

But Harry didn't need to tell her. It quickly became evident exactly what was going on. He was extending the Armor onto Tonks. It traveled up her arms and spread from there, with her head being the last thing to get engulfed in the light. Like Harry, it transformed her face into little more than a pair of large, brightly colored orbs and a mouth. Shining emerald eyes met glowing blue as Harry grinned once more and, with a tight grip on his future wife, shifted.

"Harry..." Tonks said slowly, looking around as the other side came into view. "Oh my."

"'Oh my'?" Harry repeated, grinning.

"Quiet. This is... I don't..." Tonks said, making a face. "This is beautiful..."

"It's calming here." Harry said, pulling Tonks close, making sure to keep hold of her at all times. "This is what I get to experience when I shift. I wanted to show you. I wanted you to see. I... don't know if part of me expects you to understand why I've done what I've done now. I've been very nervous about this whole thing."

"I'd imagine... oh hey, look! I can see the others now!" Tonks said, pointing.

Sure enough, through Harry's help, she had acclimated quickly. Both sides were visible to her now. And within moments she was looking all over the place. "Whoa... you can see everything... ...*HELLO*, including people showering!"

"Nym!" Harry cried.

"Well you *can*!" Tonks argued, pointing vaguely to one side.

"Yes, but you shouldn't! I don't!" Harry argued.

"Oh bull, I know you probably looked at least once." Tonks said.

"Not on purpose! I know where most of the showers are, so I knew to watch where I was looking around there! Anyway, stop making me out to be a pervert!" Harry said. "Here, see that blue line next to you? Step onto it with me."

"Don't you change the subject on me." Tonks said, lightly swatting Harry on the arm.

"You're the only girl I've seen naked, woman. Now stop being so defensive and lemme show you what it feels like to actually *travel* like this!" Harry said, scooping Tonks up despite her cry of indignity.

"We'll see abou--*WHOA!*" Tonks cried out the moment Harry actually got one of the currents. And off they went, Harry choosing relatively tame lines through the school. They had just eaten, after all. He wasn't about to risk any corkscrews or loops with a stomach full of food.

"See?" Harry whispered. "These things are how the house elves get around. They're everywhere that magic is located. The night of the Hogsmeade attacks, if I hadn't shifted to the edge of the grounds, I never would have saved as many as I had. I know you've wondered why I keep pushing myself. Why I keep using the Armor to do this, despite the strain on my body. This is why. Because I don't want to give this up. That may not be the answer you were looking for, but it's what I have. If I had no reason to push myself, I would have never been able to use this form of travel. I don't think any other wizard has ever utilized it before."

Tonks shook her head. "I know why you do it all, Harry. You're the hero. If you don't do it, who will? I just... worry..."

"I know. And I'm sorry. Dumbledore and I have been talking. We're... thinking about moving up the date of the Azkaban raid. Voldemort's been up to something. There's been a dull throbbing in my scar for days. I haven't mentioned it to anyone. But I know he's doing

something. And that makes me worried. He knows what I can do now."

"He'll try and push you to your limits? Is that what you're worried about?"

"Something like that. I'm also worried that if he floods an area with Altered, I won't be able to drop them all. They can erect magical shields all they want. They can't hold them forever. And it takes me far longer to recharge than it should still. Until I can tap into my wild magic and channel it effectively, I'll be worried that I'm not strong enough to protect everyone." Harry said quietly, moving from one current to another. Their time was almost up.

"You need to realize you can't protect everyone all the time... it isn't healthy thinking you *can*." Tonks said.

"I know... but I still want to try. I need to get stronger. I need to get to Azkaban, take what I need, and reforge the Gauntlet. But... Nym, I need to talk to you about that. There's something I'm going to need to do on Azkaban. I haven't told anyone else about it yet. It's one of those things I'd talk to Boris about if he was still here. You're the only one I trust enough to tell..."

"After everyone's gone?"

"Yeah. Alright, here we are." Harry said. "Back where we began. Ready to shift again?"

"No. But let's go. This has got to be a drain on your energy." Tonks said.

"True. But it was worth it." Harry said.

And with that, they shifted back in almost at the exact point they left, causing more surprised noises from the parents. Harry carefully removed the Armor from Tonks before he dropped it completely, letting out an exhausted sigh. "Oof. That took more out of me than I thought it would. But it worked!"

"That was beautiful." Tonks said, latching onto Harry and squeezing him. "Thanks."

"Your gifts certainly are unique, aren't they?" Luna asked, smiling.

"Yeah. No telling what this guy's going to give me as a present. Keeps me on my toes, at least." Tonks said, grinning.

"Since when could you use the Patronus Armor to bring someone else along for the ride?" Asked Lupin.

"Since a few days ago. Dobby was helping me out." Harry explained, slightly leaning against Tonks until he could catch his breath. "Hope I didn't cause any shock when it happened."

"I nearly fainted, thank you very much!" Mrs. Granger said. "A little warning would be nice."

Harry grinned. "Sorry, ma'am. Was a bit too nervous to think about doing anything but getting it over with at the time, though."

"Potter at a loss for words." Malfoy drawled. "Yeah, that's a new one."

"Shut up, Draco." Harry said, casting the Slytherin a withering glare.

"As you wish, O Mighty Hero." Malfoy said, offering a mock bow.

"Man, he gets sassy when he gets a little wine in him, doesn't he?" Tonks asked.

"He's like his father in that regard." Narcissa said, eyebrow raised. "Unfortunately."

"Yes, unfortunately." Malfoy agreed, nodding. "One of the few things I will be forever stuck with as a reminder."

"Quick, someone get that mistletoe over him before he angsts us to death!" Tonks cried.

"Oi oi." Malfoy said, giving Tonks the evil eye. "Besides, who would I kiss? Unlike the rest of you lovebirds, I'm not the kind to believe love

should bloom on the battlefield. There's no sense in finding someone when there's a chance they might not make it to war's end."

"That's our Draco." Pansy said, sighing exasperatedly. "Always gets you in good spirits."

"Just being sensible about the matter is all." Malfoy said, shrugging.

"And stop acting like you don't have a girlfriend. It's irritating the hell out of me." Pansy said.

Malfoy locked up for a moment before turning to glare at Pansy. "I beg your pardon?"

"I saw you two kiss just yesterday! Don't try and deny it!"

"Pansy, so help me, if you..."

Waving a dismissive hand, Pansy interrupted. "No need to be so cranky, Draco. You could do with a good snog. Might cause you to be a bit less uptight all the time!"

"I could say the same about you, Parkinson." Malfoy shot back.

"Alright, you two." Harry said, stepping forward. "Let's not bicker. Pansy, leave him alone. Draco, go snog your girlfriend."

"Damn it, Potter!" Malfoy yelled.

Harry laughed. "Settle down, settle down! I'm only teasing you. What, you're above that now? You knew what you were getting into by jumping ship. I've just been nice about it. So who's your love interest? You gonna tell us or are we going to have to guess?"

"Or buy the info from me." Pansy added.

"Or buy the info from her." Harry appended.

"I hate you all." Draco groused.

Harry laughed, as did several others. Cocking an eyebrow, Harry turned and grinned at Lupin. "And what, may I ask, are *you* finding so funny, Moony? You're in the same boat as Draco is!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Lupin stated, a small smile showing through.

"Yeah, I bet you don't. At least I know who *you're* dating." Harry said, walking over to the werewolf and poking him in the chest. "You can admit it or I can do it for you!"

"You wouldn't dare." Lupin said.

"Oh?" His eyes shifted quickly to Andromeda then back again. "Wouldn't I?"

"Uh... mum?" Tonks said suddenly, pointing above her mother's head.

"What? Oh... oh dear." Andromeda said, glancing up. At some point, the mistletoe had sparked back to life. It was currently hovering over her.

"Cheap trick, Harry." Lupin said, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Oh, very well. Andi, we may as well tell them."

As Harry grinned triumphantly, Tonks' jaw dropped when Lupin stepped towards Andromeda, took her into his arms, and kissed her. When the two broke apart, Andromeda blushing fiercely, Lupin turned and looked towards Harry and Tonks. "Satisfied?"

"I certainly am. Nym might be a bit more shocked at the matter, though." Harry said, glancing aside.

"I don't think 'shocked' is the right word." Tonks said slowly, shaking her head. "How long have you two...?"

"At least since before the start of term." Harry said. "Remember him saying he had a date? I kept noticing how much your mother was giving him little looks and smiles every time the two of them were together."



"Caught like mice in a trap." Lupin said. "Yes, yes. Andi and I have been seeing each other since this summer."

"At first, it was..." Andromeda began, making a face. "It was to help each other get over Sirius' death. We were both close to him, albeit in different ways. It... just sort of happened from there, I guess."

"Well," Tonks said, tilting her head. "I can't say I'd be upset having him as a step-father. He'd certainly be better than *Ted* was."

"Nymmy." Andromeda said, warningly.

"Don't 'Nymmy' me!" Tonks scowled. "The man was worthless! You just don't want to vocalize that fact."

"In any case," Lupin began, sidetracking the discussion before it could get any worse, "I was thinking of letting everyone know soon, anyway. It was getting tricky sneaking around. I think Albus had a good idea of what was going on, too..."

"I'm sure he did. He's tricky like that sometimes." Harry said. "Well, then. I'd say this is as good a cause as any for a bit more alcohol. If we can wrest the bottle away from Draco, we should make a toast to the not-so-new, happy couple."

"Potter, I'm warning you..." Muttered Draco.

The party began winding down shortly after that. Each little family group moved to their own spot in the Pit to talk quietly before opening presents. Harry wasn't paying much attention to any of it. He and Tonks were on the couch and, as so often as the case, he was lost in the flames of the fireplace. His scar was beginning to throb. He was trying to tap into that pain and work his way to Voldemort to see exactly what was going on. But he got the point just fifteen minutes later.

Letting out a sharp cry as his scar split open, Harry leaned forward and clutched his forehead.

"Harry!" Tonks cried. "What's wrong?!"

"Voldemort's attacking London!" Harry yelled through clenched teeth. "It's a full scale assault! He's got most of his active Death Eaters there! At least a hundred Dementors, Altered and original! Ahh... damn it... how the hell did I not figure it out?! I *knew* he was going to do something! I knew he was planning an attack!"

Just then, the flames in the fireplace flared green and Dumbledore stepped through, a grave expression on his face. A quick glance to Harry followed by a scan of the room let him know that everyone must have known. "We have to go. Harry, I hate to ask you this, but..."

"I'll go." Harry hissed, getting to his feet. "I'll plow the road. Everyone else should keep their focus on the Death Eaters."

"All active Order members, please come with me." Dumbledore said. "Everyone else will remain here until we return."

"Harry..." Tonks said, getting up.

"Don't worry." Harry said, grinning at Tonks. "I'll bring everyone back alive."

Tonks nodded, leaning in to give Harry a quick kiss. "Please be careful."

"I will, Nym." Harry murmured. "Tom's going to regret attacking again. If he's there..."

Most of the adults in the room walked over as Harry began to fix his forehead up. Dumbledore led the group through the Pit's fireplace back up to his office, where they would then begin to Floo to a location near the attack. Before he left, Harry glanced back at everyone in the Pit.

"I'll keep them all safe. I won't let them die." He said.

"They know the risks." Said Draco, arms crossed. "Mother can take care of herself. I'm sure she can't wait to find Lucius."

"I'll be back soon. I'll end it as quickly as I can..." Harry said. Closing his eyes for a moment, he turned and stepped into the fireplace, getting whisked away.

"Sometimes I wish I were better at fighting." Maria said. "I hate lingering behind at times like this..."

"Battle isn't for everyone." Xenophilius stated. "Best to remain behind and be able to take care of the wounded than to go into combat unprepared and put others at risk."

"Could one of you fill us in?" Mr. Granger asked. "What's happening out there?"

"War." Hermione said, glancing at the fireplace. "Remember that dark wizard I've told you about? And those creatures that steal souls?"

"They're going to fight those things?" Mrs. Granger asked.

Hermione nodded.

"And they're taking someone your age with them?"

"Harry's different." Tonks said, hugging herself. "He's our only defense on what the Dementors have become. He's the only one strong enough to beat Voldemort."

"So... now what?" Asked Mr. Granger.

"We wait." Solieyu said. "And we pray."

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## Chapter 18 – Dominus

Harry landed with a *CRACK* on the ground just outside the fireplace, swearing violently as he grasped his knee. One day, he was going to perfect Floo travel. For now, however, he sucked it up and got to his feet, limping slightly as he stepped into the darkened room. The sounds of combat resounded in the distance.

The house they were in was abandoned, though it looked like the family had only recently left. There was still food left on the dining room table. The place was fairly packed with people, both from the Order and from the Ministry.

"What's happening out there?" Harry asked, walking towards the largest group.

"An invasion." Snape hissed. The man looked absolutely terrible. He was bleeding in many places and his robes were severely sliced up. "The Dark Lord has decided to give you a true test, Potter."

"What happened to you?"

"Voldemort discovered Severus' true nature. Luckily, he was able to get away before things got too bad." Said Dumbledore, walking over. "How do you feel?"

"I feel as I look." Snape snapped. Looking back to Harry, he continued, "He has brought over a hundred Dementors - a mix of the two types - along with the better portion of the Death Eaters that aren't out near Germany."

"Germany? What's in Germany?" Harry asked.

"Wagner." Snape replied.

"Wagner?"

"Later, Potter." Snape growled. "We're going to need you to clear a path. The Dementors are guarding the Death Eaters. They're devastating everything they come across."

"They're going at a leisurely pace." Came the voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Simply going up and down random streets, leaving nothing living in their wake. We tried to get to the Death Eaters from the air, but they were easily blocking our spells. And getting close to that many Dementors is rough, even for the most seasoned of us."

"Especially for the most seasoned of us." Said another Auror, shaking her head slowly.

"I'll do what I can. But I've never had to try taking out a group that large." Harry said, looking around. "I can't promise I'll be able to kill all of them."

"If it comes to it, try to focus on the Altered. The other Dementors are still affected by the Patronus Charm. We can get them out of our way." Said Kingsley.

"And do not worry about the Death Eaters, Harry." Dumbledore said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I will have someone get you a safe distance away after you have used the Sanctus Defaeco. If the Hogsmeade and Forbidden Forest incidents are any indication, you are going to be exhausted after facing so many Dementors."

Sighing, Harry nodded. "Nothing I can do about it, I guess. ...Who's going out?" Harry asked.

"All of us." Kingsley said. "We were just waiting for you to get here. There are a few more groups out there, hiding and waiting for the signal to move. The minute we get out there and start the attack, I'll send the signal up. We've got more numbers than they do. It's just that the Dementors are effectively acting as an impenetrable wall."

Harry nodded again. "Alright. Let's get this over with, then. The longer we wait, the more people are going to be killed."

"Good luck, Harry." Dumbledore said. "Now... let us get to work."

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Harry flattened himself against the wall of the alley, peering around the corner and narrowing his eyes. Sure enough, they were rounding

the end of the road. He was positioned halfway up this one. Something was wrong, though. Harry hated it when something felt wrong. He couldn't place why, but he felt as though he was being watched. He knew there was no one else in the alley with him, and he had guards stationed on nearby rooftops. He also knew the feeling wasn't being caused by them. He tried to squash the feeling down, though it was difficult.

The street had been cleared before the Death Eaters and Dementors had gotten to it. Whether they knew or not was anyone's guess. But the Altered were leaping up through second floor windows in the hunt for food while the regular Dementors glided in on ground level. Every so often, one of the Death Eaters would fire a destructive attack into a building, causing an explosion.

*'You want to kill them, don't you?'* Hissed a soft voice in his head.

*'The only things I want to kill are the Dementors.'* Harry responded, gritting his teeth. *'Now shut up. I need to concentrate.'*

*'Fine. But watch out. It feels like we're being watched by vultures, just waiting for a moment of weakness to descend and finish us off.'*

*'Tension? From you? That's new.'*

*'I don't like the feeling any more than you do.'* Growled the voice. *'It would be so much easier if we overloaded the Defaeco. The area's clear, for god's sake. Order our men away and nuke the god damned place, you blithering idiot!'*

*'No.'*

*'One day your kindness will get you killed. You or one of your friends!'* Screamed the voice suddenly. *'Then what?! Are you going to accept me then?! AFTER someone dies?!'*

*"No one's going to die."* Harry growled out loud. *"I'll make sure of it. I'll protect everyone myself!"*

*'You can't do that. You know as much.'*

*"Shut up." Harry hissed. "Just SHUT UP! I'll show all of you! I'll protect them all with my own power..."*

*'...As you wish. When the day comes, I'll be here. Remember that. Because the pain you'll remember after losing your friends won't be anywhere near as bad as the knowledge that you could have saved them but didn't. And why? Because you refuse to acknowledge that you need me.'*

Harry's eyes turned solid green as his body was encased in light. He ran out from his hiding spot, ignoring the shouts of his guards. To hell with the damned plan! He didn't need a plan! He would slaughter the Dementors and immobilize the Death Eaters by himself! He wouldn't have anyone else risking their lives when he was perfectly capable of doing it on his own. His other half didn't know what it was talking about. Another scheme to try and take control and cause another massacre, no doubt.

Launching himself high into the air, Harry threw his arms out in front of him. From his hands shot spear-like bolts of light. As the Death Eaters yelled and started firing spells into the air, the spears of light began piercing Dementors. When every last one had connected, Harry broke away from them and shifted back to the ground, forcefully shooting straight down rather than riding the currents properly.

Shifting back in, he rushed forward into the crowd of Dementors and Altered that had gathered in front of the Death Eaters. Good - all of them in one place, he thought, laughing as his right eye flashed a different color for a moment. He let himself get piled on top of by the Dementors, the cold feeling engulfing him and forcing up memories he'd rather now remember. But rather than break his focus, it helped him to concentrate better. That was why he was doing this. That was why he *had* to do this. The people who died did so because Harry was a target. If he was unable to protect himself, he had to rely on others to do it. Others who would rush to their deaths if needed.

He wasn't going to let that happen again.

A scream left his throat as a sphere of light erupted around the Dementors. Once inside the Defaeco, Harry picked out each

Dementor and twisted them, ripped them, and made them cry out in pain. They would know the meaning of the word before they died, he was going to make sure of that. Finally, unable to take the piercing light anymore, their bodies dissolved, leaving nothing but ash and blackened hearts behind.

Dropping the Defaeco, Harry staggered back slightly as he regained his balance. There were a few Dementors and Altered lingering, but he had gotten most of them. A smaller Defaeco with a higher number of Dementors in its range seemed to work more efficiently than one giant Defaeco. He could focus it better and it drained less energy. The longer he could remain in combat, the less chance there would be of someone else getting killed.

But again that feeling washed over him. The Death Eaters didn't look afraid. In fact, they seemed amused. Especially the one in the front. They had removed their masks at some point, probably when Harry had invoked the Defaeco.

"What's so funny?" Harry growled out, eyes narrowing.

"You think you've already won this battle. Isn't that right, Potter?" Asked the Death Eater in the front. He had dark green eyes and a scar across his chin. His hair was mangy and grey, though he seemed to be fairly young.

"I know I have." Harry replied. "Your Dementor forces have already almost been eliminated. It won't take long to finish the rest."

"And you think that's it?" Asked the man.

"What do you mean?"

Smirking, the man stepped forward and bowed deeply. "My name is William Greybark. I lead what the Dark Lord refers to as his research team. I helped plant the seed that eventually sprouted and became the Altered." His smirk dropped, replaced with a dark expression. "Unfortunately, I couldn't have predicted you pulling this out of your ass. The Altered have since been labeled a failed experiment. A good number still remain... a good deal less now that you've taken out a few dozen more... and will help protect our Master. You'd be



surprised how often some adventure seeking twit finds the Citadel by accident and thinks he can become a hero."

"Get to the point!" Harry roared, lowering down.

"The point..." Greybark continued, "Is that we have advanced the Dementor species once more. And, apparently, we have done so without you getting wind of it this time."

"What...?"

A wild grin split Greybark's face as he turned to face the other Death Eaters. "AHA! We were right, boys! He doesn't have a clue what's about to happen to him!"

Uproarious laughter filled the air. Greybark turned and leveled a sneer at Harry. "Poor, poor, pitiful Potter. Always being caught off guard, aren't you?"

"Tell me what you've done to them." Harry spat.

"Or you'll do what?" Greybark asked, smirking one more.

Harry's head jerked to one side as he flung his left arm out towards the Death Eater next to Greybark. His glowing hand plunged through the jet black robes of the Death Eater, seemingly piercing his chest. Moments later and the man's eyes went wide and a horrible rattle escaped his lips.

"Or..." Harry hissed, his right eye glowing red. "We'll rip your souls out ourself. We *can* do that, you know. Didn't you know? You claim to be leading Voldemort's research division? Did you know what became of us once the Altered came into existence? We *BECAME* a Dementor."

Harry jerked his hand back sharply. And there, enclosed in his clawed hand, was the glowing orb that represented the Death Eater's soul. Snapping his arm back to its normal length, Harry held the soul up, being careful not to damage it. "If we were to encase you in the Defaeco, we could pull them out all at once. But it's much more fun to do it one by one. don't you think? Seeing the look on the person's face as their soul is plucked from their body? Seeing them turned into

a withering husk of their former selves? Let me ask you, William Greybark... do you know what happens to one's soul when a Dementor sucks it out?"

"They eat it." Greybark said, not looking so amused anymore. As the man to his side dropped to the ground, whimpering and drooling, he narrowed his eyes. "And once that happens..."

"It's as good as destroyed." Harry finished, the tips of his claws piercing the Death Eater's soul. The man on the ground let out a sharp howl of pain. "You can put a soul back in, you know. But only if it isn't damaged. But what if you begin toying with it? What if you slowly peel it like an orange? What happens to its vessel? Would you like us to show you?"

"I'm well aware of what happens when a soul is mutilated." Greybark stated. "Do *you* know what happens to those responsible for such an act?"

"They change." Harry hissed. His other eye flared red as he brought the man's soul up. The line of his mouth split clean back to his ears and cracked wide open. "And they evolve."

"What are you doing?" Asked Greybark.

"Refueling." Hissed Harry, an awful, red mist escaping his mouth as he brought the soul to it.

But before anything could happen, a blast of magic flew past his head, barely missing where his ear would have been. Narrowing his eyes, he turned and saw several Order members on the street. Dumbledore was in the front.

"What are you doing?" Growled Harry.

"Preventing you from doing something you would regret." Dumbledore stated. "Focus on the remaining Dementors, Harry. We will handle the rest. Stick to the plan."

"The plan is no longer needed!" Harry yelled, mouth size returning to normal as he crushed the Death Eater's soul in his hand. Almost at

once, a gargling noise escaped the man. Brushing the residue off his hand, Harry smirked. "We can handle them all."

"Yes, but you'll also over-tax yourself. What happens if this is a distraction?" Asked Dumbledore.

"A distraction?" Repeated Harry.

"He could be using this to expend your energy. Surely your recharge time has been known to Voldemort for some time. Do you believe he would not attempt such a tactic?"

"Hmm..." Harry said, eyes narrowing in thought. Their green color split the red vertically and reclaimed dominance. When he looked back up, he nodded. "Very well. We'll go along for now. I'll give control back to him. I'm sure he's angry enough to finish his end of your plan. But if any of you die..."

"We will survive this." Dumbledore said, a faint smile emerging. "Not to the likes of them."

"Another one who doesn't understand." Greybark said, chuckling softly.

"And what, may I ask, do I not understand?" Asked Dumbledore, coming up to stand beside Harry, who suddenly had his head in one hand and was swearing under his breath.

"I'll tell you what I told Potter, old man - we've once more achieved in a breakthrough. The Dementors have been changed again. This time, however... we believe we've removed their most pesky weakness."

"And that would be?"

"His light." Greybark said.

"My... light?" Harry asked, coughing out a green mist. "Explain!"

"I thought I was being fairly explanatory. But very well... if you need an explanation, I suppose I'll have to dumb it down for you. Tell me

something, Potter. Have you felt like you were being watched tonight?"

"...Yes." Harry said. This didn't sound good.

"There's a reason for that. Would you like to know what it is?" Asked Greybark slowly. When Harry didn't reply, he continued, "Look up. Look up and witness our crowning achievement. Witness what we've created. A creature bred to be intelligent enough to lead an army of Dementors on its own. One to command them. One to lord over them. A leader. A *GOD!*"

Harry slowly tilted his head back. And there, just barely visible against the black of the night sky, was a Dementor. For a moment, Harry mistook it for an Altered. The body structure was almost identical. But one of its eyes was sewn shut, making the glowing, red orb in the other socket all the more noticeable. It wasn't until the creature actually moved did something dawn on Harry. It was flying.

"Dominus." Purred Greybark. "A god to rule over the lesser beings... an angel of death. One impervious to your light. Tell me, Potter... how do you plan to kill a god?"

The Dementor dropped to the ground then. And that's when its large wings became fully visible. As black as the creature itself, light reflected from what appeared to be specs of metal littered throughout their seemingly torn form. They looked as decrepit as the rest of the creature, though it was clearly capable of remaining aloft with them. As it stood up, the wings folded down and around its front, making it appear as though it had a cloak on.

Harry lashed out suddenly, whipping one of his arms towards the new Dementor. Not only did it apparently not do anything to the creature, it physically hurt Harry. He had contacted metal, not rotting skin. What the hell had Voldemort and his research team done to that thing?!

"What's wrong?" Greybark asked. "Does it hurt, Potter? Is that old, familiar fear creeping back into your bones? You'd do well to remember it. Because now the tide of this war has once more turned to favor our Lord. You can't stop *this* Dementor."

"We'll see about that." Harry growled. Then, turning to Dumbledore, he asked, "Can you keep the Death Eaters busy? I don't know if I can kill this thing or not, but I'm going to try. I've got to hurry, though. My other half ripping control away like that put a massive drain on my power."

"We will do our best, as they say." Dumbledore said. "Good luck, Harry."

"And... sir?"

"Yes?"

"...If you see the Defaeco turning dark... run."

"...Understood." Dumbledore said.

"Kill him." Greybark stated.

The winged Dementor shot forward suddenly, slamming into Harry and dragging him up the road. At the end of the street, it jerked upwards suddenly, pulling Harry up with him and letting out an unholy laugh. Gritting his teeth, Harry's arms split, wrapping around the Dementor's body. He channeled enough power into his light to drop a few dozen Altered. But all that served to do was to get the flying Dementor to look into his eyes. And again, its laughter filled the air.

"What the hell do you think is so funny?" Harry hissed. "*SANCTUS DEFAECO!*"

Mid-air, the sphere of light engulfed the two of them. Down below, Dumbledore narrowed his eyes, having to squint just to look in the proper direction. He couldn't remember the light being that bright before.

"What are you looking at, old man? I'm your opponent!" Howled Greybark, whipping his wand up. "*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Dumbledore stepped to one side, letting the blast of green light pass harmlessly by. It flew down the road, dissolving on the way. Turning,

he smiled pleasantly at Greybark, drawing his own wand. "Do you really believe it wise to think someone of your level can beat me?"

"Won't know until I try." Greybark said, grinning maniacally. Bringing his free hand up, he motioned to the other Death Eaters. "Find the Aurors. Find Dumbledore's men. Slaughter them all!"

And that was all it took for the battle to erupt. Dumbledore flew towards Greybark at a speed that belied his age, catching the Death Eater off guard for a brief moment. But before he could cast anything, Greybark had apparated back up the road. "*RIP HIS SOUL OUT!*"

The remaining Dementors and Altered leapt from the shadows, converging on Dumbledore. From behind him, the sound of several on his side casting the Patronus Charm could be heard. Moments later, the regular Dementors had been either chased away or destroyed outright. But the Altered weren't affected by them. Dumbledore apparated back up the road to join the rest of his team. The sounds of combat were now resounding from nearby rooftops and alleyways. The Death Eaters on the street had thinned and found the rest of the teams out.

Greybark cackled, extending his arms out to the sides. "What's wrong?! Are the Altered too big a threat to you, O Mighty Albus Dumbledore?!"

Dumbledore whispered quickly to his men, "All of you, fall back. I will handle this on my own. There is no need for any of you to risk your lives trying to stave off the Altered."

"We're not going anywhere." Said one of the men. "We knew what we were getting into when we joined you, Albus."

Another nodded. "Whatever happens, we're in this together. We aren't going to abandon you."

Dumbledore smirked, despite himself. "I am quite open to hearing any suggestions on what to do. If any of you have a pla--"

An echoing scream filled the air, sending out a shock wave that nearly bowled everyone down below over. Spinning and looking up,

Dumbledore saw that the sphere of light that Harry and the flying Dementor were encased in was crackling with a dark energy. It was whipping around the sphere like electricity. Dumbledore narrowed his eyes. "We may not have much time to finish this. If I tell you to run - run. Do not ask questions. Understood?"

His men just nodded, staring at the unstable Defaeco. Greybark's laughter soon filled the silence that the scream left. "What's wrong?!" He yelled. "Is your precious little trump card getting killed? Are you worried, old man?!"

"Of course I am worried." Dumbledore said, his voice harsh. "But I am quite confident in Harry's abilities."

"Awww, how precious." Greybark cooed. "Your confidence is ill-placed. He can't kill the Dominus and he can't save you from the Altered!"

Once again, the Altered charged towards Dumbledore and his team. But this time, they were intercepted. A stray burst of light escaped the Defaeco, slamming into the road between the Altered and Dumbledore's group. The Altered halted for a moment before leaping to either side and attempting to go around it. More bursts of light, slamming down almost as spears, escaped the Defaeco, once more getting in the Altered's way.

"Harry..." Dumbledore breathed, muscles tensing. "We can handle ourselves... concentrate on your own opponent..."

Once more, the Altered started to move around. But this time something else stopped them. As the first went past one of the spears of light, a hand shot out of it, grabbing the Dementor by the throat. Slowly, a head and torso emerged from near the top of the light spear, its glowing green orbs focusing on the Altered in its hand. Its mouth split and it roared, a pulse of light flaring from its hand. The Altered was only able to let out a short, pained howl before it was killed.

The remaining Altered backed away from the light spears slowly. The creature turned to look towards them for a moment before sinking back into the light.

"When did Potter learn to do that?" Asked one of the Aurors near Dumbledore.

"I do not know..." Dumbledore said slowly, brow creased. As far as he knew, Harry *couldn't* do anything like that. Apparently, he was wrong. And now the Altered were so spooked of getting near the light that they were hanging back like cowering dogs. Greybark was not amused in the least.

"Kill them! What the hell are you waiting for?!" He shrieked. "Climb the buildings and leap down beyond the light, damn you!"

The Altered looked at one another before hissing. Their number split and they did as they were told, climbing the nearby buildings in order to bypass the spears of light on the ground. The team with Dumbledore all took up defensive positions. They were capable of producing a shield that would keep the Altered at bay, but they could do nothing to attack the creatures.

Reaching the rooftops, the Altered stalked along the edges of the buildings, focusing on the wizards below. They were a meal and that damnable light was keeping them from eating. But as they reached the point where they were going to leap down, another oddity occurred. From the central spear of light shot a full, exact replica of what Harry looked like in the Patronus Armor. It hovered in the air for a moment as it reached the peak of its 'jump' before a dozen beams of light shot out from either side, piercing the nearby Altered.

As they howled and struggled against the light that was infiltrating their bodies, the creature in the air pulled them in closer. They were unable to escape. And once they were close enough, an almost metallic, echoing voice growled, "*SANCTUS DEFAECO!*"

A second sphere of light filled the night sky, immediately killing the remaining Altered that it had drawn in. The orb quickly vanished, leaving nothing in its wake, not even the creature that the spear of light had spawned. The spears were the next thing to fizzle out, leaving the men on the ground looking perplexed as to what they had just witnessed.



There would be time to ponder it later though, Dumbledore decided, his attention turning once more to William Greybark, who looked as though someone had ruined Christmas. A smile crossed the headmaster's face as he brought his wand up.

"Shall we, then?"

Meanwhile, high overhead in the first sphere of light and unbeknown to everyone down below, Harry was struggling to stay alive. The flying Dementor, the Dominus, wasn't dying like it should have. The power of the Defaeco had absolutely no effect on it. And all the while, Harry had been keeping an eye on what was going on with Dumbledore's group. When he had seen the Dementors going for them, he had done what he had to. The spears of light themselves were fine, as it didn't take much energy to shoot those out.

But the replicas had taken too much energy to use, to say nothing of what the second Defaeco had done to him. Now in a drastically weaker state, Harry only had one chance to finish the seemingly invincible Dominus before he would have to retreat. He was feeling a burning pain in his chest. He was pushing himself too hard and was sustaining the Defaeco for far longer than he should have.

"So being surrounded by light does nothing, huh?" He hissed. "Let's see if I can't drill straight through you, then!"

While he could do nothing to the Dominus, simply having it within the Defaeco was causing it to move as though in slow motion. Harry wasn't physically being harmed, but the drain of keeping such a powerful spell going for such a long time coupled with the assistance he had given Dumbledore was almost worse.

Floating back to one edge of the sphere, Harry closed his eyes and concentrated. Another, smaller ball of light began to form in front of him, its light shining brighter than the Defaeco itself was. Coughing violently, releasing a deep red mist, Harry cracked one eye open and growled, "I won't let him think he's won. I'll teach him that he can't kill me with something like *you*. I'm sick of being toyed with! Who the hell does he think I am?!"

The sphere of light shot forward, slamming into the Dominus' chest, right where Harry knew a Dementor's heart to be. The sound of twisting metal immediately filled the area inside the Defaeco. Decayed flesh was bored away from the metallic bits hidden just underneath as the light pushed its way deeper and deeper into the Dementor. The Defaeco started to fade, causing Harry to focus purely on the sphere he was attacking with. If the Defaeco dropped before his attack reached the Dominus' heart, it would be able to get away. There would be no way for Harry to aim the damned thing outside of the Defaeco.

On the streets below, Dumbledore was smiling down at an unconscious William Greybark. He and his men had been swiftly dispatched. The regular Dementors that had been chased away earlier had been rounded up and destroyed. Now, the headmaster turned his attention back on the Defaeco overhead. The sounds of combat were dying down. His men were winning. He knew they were. These Death Eaters had to be some of the weakest, combat-wise, that Voldemort had ever sent out to fight.

Just then, something shot out of one side of the sphere. The Dominus, looking as though something had just rammed it at full speed, only got a short distance away before it exploded, sending a shower of dark ash and rapidly melting metal raining down. The giant sphere of light immediately dissipated, leaving a lone figure in the sky. One that soon keeled over backwards and began to fall. Dumbledore quickly raised his wand, but Harry's body vanished.

"Shift?" Dumbledore murmured. "...I'm going back to the safe house I brought Harry in through! Go find the rest of our men, collect the dead, and round up the Death Eaters!"

Meanwhile, a short distance away, Harry shifted back in, causing a bit of a surprise to the Aurors and Order members still lingering in the safe house. His Armor was released as soon as he shifted back in, but he still collapsed to the ground, straining to breathe.

"Potter! What the hell?!" Snape barked, quickly getting up (and hissing out a swear under his breath as one of his cuts opened back up from the sudden movement) and rushing over. Pushing people out

of his way to get to the fallen Ravenclaw, Snape knelt down. "What's happened out there?"

"I'm... I'm fine..." Harry groaned slowly. "Every... everyone's okay..."

"You're certainly *not* 'fine,' Potter. Now shut up and stop trying to stay awake." Snape ordered. "You've done your job, apparently showboating as usual, now stop trying to play the damned hero and start recovering. I'll go find Poppy."

*'Snape's being nice to us.'* Harry thought, mentally laughing.

*'We could have done that so much easier, you know.'* Came the other voice in his head.

*'Shut up. I can't wait to shackle you down. I can't believe you were going to make us eat someone's soul!'*

*'It would have replenished our power.'* The voice stated calmly. *'We're going to end up having to recover for awhile. Again. All because you refuse to do what's needed to win.'*

*'If that means becoming a monster, I'd sooner die.'* Harry declared. *'We won today. That's all that matters.'*

*'You say that now. We'll see how willing you are to accept me when we attack Azkaban. Surely you've realized it too. Those new Dementors... they'll have more Domini there. It took all our power to kill one in a prolonged fight.'*

*'I know exactly where to strike it and how much power to pump into the attack.'* Harry argued. *'They won't be a problem.'*

*'They won't be a problem.'* Repeated the voice. *'Do you hear yourself?! I'm embarrassed to be a part of you, you great twit! What if he has a few dozen by the time we attack? What then? You going to encase them all in the Defaeco and take them out one by one? And what power do you plan on doing this with?!'*

Harry was silent to that.

*'Yeah, I thought so.' Muttered the voice. 'Mark my words, partner - we'll fuse before this school year ends. If I can't make you see that, maybe Tom will.'*

*'Shut up.'*

*'The truth sucks sometimes, doesn't it?'*

*'I said shut up!'*

*'Very well. But only because we need rest. I can't have you dying. Not when we're still separate entities.'*

*'How the hell did you even get control away from me? I didn't feel you making a move this time...'*

The voice chuckled. *'Your thoughts were the same as mine for a fraction of a second. I used that chance to move. Better be careful, partner. You may realize we do have something in common after all.'*

Harry would have argued, but he was finding his vision quite blurry. Letting his eyes close, Harry muttered a quiet, "Screw this" before allowing himself to pass out. A few moments later, Dumbledore entered the house. Shortly after that, Snape returned with Madam Pomfrey, who was giving him an earful of opening his own wounds back up. After a once over, Madam Pomfrey declared that Harry would be fine as ever after some rest.

Dumbledore went on to tell the assembled crowd what had transpired outside, going into detail on the spears of light and the new type of flying Dementor. The mood in the room was grim after that. Because although they had won, seven of their number wouldn't be celebrating their future victories and the amount of time and effort that would be going into cleanup would be great. Scrimgeour's men would have their hands full finding and memory altering the Muggles who were in the area that night.

This also cemented one thing in Dumbledore's mind: They could waste no more time. There was no telling what kind of further monstrosities Voldemort would concoct out of the Dementors if given enough time.

As soon as Harry was healed, they would lay siege to Azkaban.

## Chapter 19 – Overdrive

It was a fight they'd had dozens of times over the years. No matter how many times they had it, there was never going to be a winner. He knew it. She knew it. So why did they fight? He would say they fought because it was the easiest way for her to let her feelings out. She would say they fought because she couldn't seem to drill reality into his skull. A reality where he could end up going to fight and not coming back. And even if he survived, something else might happen. It was talked about almost every time he came back from a battle.

If she were there now, Harry thought, staring blankly up at the ceiling behind Madam Pomfrey, she would have rubbed it in his face.

"You've finally done it, Potter." Madam Pomfrey said, her quiet voice carrying a tired tone to it. "You've cracked your magical core."

Blowing out a low sigh, Harry blinked a few times. He didn't even want to be awake right now. All he wanted to do was sleep. But Madam Pomfrey seemed bound and determined to prevent that. "Okay. Meaning? How long is this going to keep me out of combat?"

"If it were up to me, you wouldn't be fighting ever again. Because now that you've cracked it, there's always going to be a risk for doing it again. The first time's the hardest. After that, you might as well just stick a 'fragile' sign on your forehead. That said... you seem to have a way of healing faster than my normal patients do. There was an abnormality at the base of the fracture. I'm not sure what it was." Madam Pomfrey explained, looking exasperated.

"He's probably trying to fix it." Harry murmured, one eye slipping shut. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"You're not 'fine,' Harry." Said Dumbledore, gently. He was standing just off to one side of the nurse. "You're effectively not going to be able to cast magic properly for awhile. When we get back to Hogwarts, I'm going to make your friends keep you in your quarters and resting for at least one week. ...You didn't have to push yourself that hard."

"I won't bow down to anyone." Harry growled weakly. "I'll not be walked over by every stupid idea Tommy comes up with. If that was his trump card, then he's failed. Just hope there aren't a few dozen of the damn things at the Citadel. That... that might be a bit o' trouble..."

"Poppy." Dumbledore said, glancing aside.

"...Yes, very well. Rest, Potter. My examination is over with. Get your sleep. But once you're up and around, you'll be coming to me every twelve hours for check-ups. I want to keep a close eye on that fracture. Understand?" Madam Pomfrey said, turning and beginning to pack her things away.

"Yeah yeah... dotin' old battleaxe..." Harry mumbled, eyes slowly closing. "Gotta screw loose, lady... m'fine... everyone's gonna be fine..."

As Harry went limp once again, Dumbledore let out a quiet chuckle. "He went above and beyond the call of duty. He saved my life, along with all of those under my command."

"And nearly killed himself in the process. Again." Madam Pomfrey said, snapping her bag shut with enough force to cause Dumbledore to look over. She was openly glaring at him. "He may be our best shot against Voldemort's forces, but that doesn't make him our only weapon. Has no one thought up a way to replicate what he does with the Patronus Armor active? Why does he have to try and suffer through this alone? Do you think he isn't bearing a huge amount of weight on his shoulders because everyone's expecting him to succeed, Albus?"

"Poppy, I know how the boy thinks." Dumbledore said, his voice softening. "If he thought he was being used, he would let it be known. But he wants to do this. He wants to be a weapon to combat Lord Voldemort and his forces. As for replicating the effects of the Armor... we *have* tried, Poppy. You haven't seen what it does to those who try to invoke it."

"What do you mean?" Asked Madam Pomfrey.

Sighing, Dumbledore reached up and pulled his spectacles off, rubbing the bridge of his nose for a moment. "Ever since Harry saved those people in Hogsmeade, Rufus has known as much about the Armor as I have. In other words, whatever Harry tells us. To his credit, he has been very forthcoming as far as information goes. But I am not sure even he knows the extent of its power. Tonight proved that much. He created duplicates of himself out of the light. I cannot begin to imagine the stress it put on his body. It is probably the sole cause of the fracture to his magical core, though. The fact that he can still only maintain form for a short period of time means that even to him, with his immense reserve of magical power, it's a draining, dangerous spell to use."

"One man's lost an arm." Came Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice. He was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, leaning against the frame. "Two have nearly fried themselves from the insides out. One had an accident involving one of his eyes that I try not to think about. One gave himself a gigantic gash from shoulder to hip. He nearly died and would have had we not had medical staff on hand. The Minister finally deemed it too dangerous to bother continuing. These men all volunteered, saying they wanted to try helping Potter out. None of them regret the damage they did to themselves. In fact, if we would allow it, they've all said they'd be willing to try *again*."

"He instills it in people, Poppy." Dumbledore murmured. "The will to fight. The desire to believe. He gives them hope. Hope that someday, Voldemort and his followers will be eliminated. The hope that these dark days *will* come to an end. And he is willing to push himself to his own breaking point to achieve that goal. He will not stop until he reaches it. And I do not think I could stop him even if I wanted to. If he had not stopped the Altered, I would not be here right now. Yes, we could have shielded ourselves. But not forever. And not against anything but the Dementors. It's all we can do, defending ourselves from them. He has, effectively, *become* the beacon of light that we were all searching for. We can only stand behind him and support him now. Because without him, the future holds no light at all."

The room was silent then, everyone glancing down at Harry's sleeping form. His hair, which had seemed to look normal when he had entered, was slowly turning lighter and lighter. After nearly five



minutes of solid silence, Kingsley cleared his throat and glanced at Dumbledore.

"We've recovered our dead and rounded up theirs. Our side shouldn't have lost any, given the poor quality of combat training those Death Eaters seem to have taken. But they had a few Dementors with them. The originals. They were catching us off guard and using that as a trump card. Everyone's accounted for. The Minister's probably going to chew me out if I wait any longer to report back to *him*, so..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Go on then. And fill him in on everything. I have a feeling things are going to be rather hectic around the Ministry for awhile. Good luck."

Kingsley chuckled wearily. "Yeah, it's going to be loads of fun hunting all of those Muggles down and changing their memories. Not an enviable time to work at the Ministry, to be sure. Keep us up to date on Potter's condition?"

"Of course." Said Dumbledore.

Kingsley nodded and, pushing himself away from the door frame with a tired grunt, turned to head off. When he was gone, Dumbledore cast a look aside at Snape. "And you, Severus?"

"What *of* me?" Asked the potions master, raising his eyebrows.

"How are your wounds doing?"

"The day a few cuts and bruises slows me down is the day I ask to teach Muggle Studies." Said Snape, turning and gliding out of the room. And, though he tried to keep the act up, Dumbledore heard him let out a quiet hiss as he spun around.

"Poppy?" Murmured Dumbledore.

Giving the headmaster a long-suffering sigh, Madam Pomfrey took off after Snape, muttering darkly under her breath about boys never knowing when to stop and get some damned sleep.

"Well then." Dumbledore said, turning and addressing the sizeable crowd that had now gathered in the otherwise empty house. "I think... it is time all of us got some sleep. Harry has the right idea. A good night's sleep will do all of us a world of good. The next few weeks are likely going to be a nightmare in all senses of the word. I wish you all the best of luck getting things back to normal. And if any of you need the assistance of myself, my staff, or Harry, please let me know."

"Get him back to his friends. I'm sure they're worried." Said one of the men nearest the headmaster.

Aiming his wand for Harry, Dumbledore glanced aside. "Will you be alright assisting for the night here, Kenneth?"

"Yeah, I'm good to go." Said the man. "I'll keep an eye on everyone here. Get Potter back to the safety of the school. It wouldn't do if You-Know-Who decided to pay us a little visit with Potter in that condition."

"Indeed. Very well, we will take our leave then, if no one has any objections." Said Dumbledore. And, hearing none, he floated Harry's body into the air. Though he'd never let it show, Albus Dumbledore was hurting. He hadn't moved like that in a good while now, and his old body was complaining mightily about it. He would apparate with Harry to the edge of the wards and carry him manually. Levitating the boy just didn't seem right. A bit more care was needed with him in as fragile a state as he was in now. And as tired as Dumbledore felt, he wasn't entirely sure he could rely on indirectly maneuvering the boy around the corridors of the castle.

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Sighing, Dumbledore shifted Harry long enough to knock at the Pit's door. This was going to just be a bucket of fun. It was always this part of the fight that he hated the most - bringing notice of the wounded or dead back to their loved ones.

The door was quickly pulled open by Draco Malfoy, who had been the closest. Not surprisingly, the Pit was just as packed as it had been when he had left. Tonks was quick to rush over and begin firing off questions. Dumbledore waited for her to take a breath to answer.

"He's not in good shape, I'm afraid. He pushed himself above and beyond the call of duty. His magical core has cracked. Poppy believes it will be fine if and only if he gets some rest and doesn't perform any magic at all for awhile." Said Dumbledore, twisting the truth just a bit. He wanted Harry to effectively be locked down for a week or longer. "He was talking and bickering just fine before Poppy let him go back to sleep. He's quite exhausted."

"What happened out there, Albus?" Asked Maria.

"I will explain soon enough. Miss Tonks, would you care to help me get him into bed?"

"Of course." Tonks said quickly. "It's over this way..."

Dumbledore followed Tonks into the bedroom, gently laying Harry down on the bed. Once he had done that, Tonks almost immediately took over. She got Harry's shoes and glasses slipped off and had the covers up and over him in a matter of seconds. Sighing, she leaned over and placed a light kiss on Harry's scar.

"You're going to make my hair grey one of these days..." She murmured.

"He's going to make his *own* go grey first if he keeps performing massive bursts of magic." Commented the headmaster, one eyebrow raised. "Would you care to come and hear what happened, or would you prefer to remain by his side?"

"I...think I'll stay in here. But leave the door open, okay? I *would* like to know what he did to himself *this* time..." Tonks said, shaking her head and sitting on the edge of the bed near Harry.

Chuckling, Dumbledore put a hand on Tonks' shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. "He'll be fine. Poppy said there was an abnormality at the base of the fracture. From what Harry said in his groggy state, I believe his other half is helping to repair the damage, so to speak. He'll recover. But I want you to ensure that he doesn't do anything strenuous for awhile, understand? I will have the staff prepare his lessons and they can be brought down here for him. At this point, I don't think he even needs to be tested on the practical

portions of things. At least not in any of the areas I assume he will need in the future."

"Never know when potions might come in handy on a mission. The Aurors get into all sorts of situations, right?" Asked Tonks.

"Indeed they do. Severus will have his own recovering to do, so I do not believe he will fault Harry for missing a week or so of class." Dumbledore said, his eyes sparkling. "Now then, to get back to the other room and inform everyone of what has happened tonight."

Tonks nodded. As Dumbledore walked out of the room and launched into an explanation of what had transpired that night, she glanced back down at Harry. He still seemed to be sleeping peacefully. By the time the headmaster had finished his recount of the night's events, Tonks had ahold of one of Harry's hands.

"Idiot." She murmured quietly. "Stop trying to save everyone... you're going to kill yourself."

"No he won't." Came the weary reply. But it wasn't Harry's voice.

"What do you want?" Tonks asked, looking down at Harry, who had his left eye open. The color of his eye was more blue than it should have been.

"Just wanted to give you an update." Said Harry. "He's resting. He will be for a good day or so. I've been trying to fix the damage he did to our core. It's looking better... but I'd be lying if I said I could fix it all the way."

"So you're both going to just have to wait it out? No shortcuts?" Tonks asked.

"No shortcuts. Not this time. We could have healed mid-battle, but Dumbledore stopped us from feeding. It wouldn't have healed us all the way... but the damage done in the end wouldn't be nearly this severe."

"Feeding? What do you mean?"

"Don't you get it?" Asked Harry. "We've effectively turned into what we're killing. We can rip the souls from things. And if we devour them... we can energize ourselves. It would have helped keep us in top form. But again, his weakness and squeamishness prevented us from using our power to its fullest extent. It's his own fault we're hurting. I don't know why I even bother trying to help anymore. He won't accept it or me."

"It's eating a soul." Tonks said, glaring. "Who would ever want to do that?"

"Anything for victory." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "Against a force this strong, we'll need it. And for a brief, wonderful moment, his thoughts and mine ran on the same wavelength. We both wanted to kill. I was hoping I could take control for the whole battle. Guess not. I just want to merge again."

"So do I. It's creepy talking to you like you were *my* Harry." Tonks said, glancing away. "If this keeps up much longer, I'm going to start calling you something else."

"We'll merge soon. We're going to attack the Citadel soon. We're running out of time now. If Voldemort is allowed to mass produce the Domini, we're all going to die. We need to merge. If we do, he'll have access to his wild magic again. He'll know how to use it. We can be in and out as quickly as possible. But if he doesn't..." Harry trailed off, sighing.

"And what if he does merge? Who's to say that he won't be completely mental like you are?" Asked Tonks.

"He was mental before we split, Nymmy."

"Don't call me that."

"He changed down in the Ministry. You've effectively not known him ever since. He's been more meek and pacifistic when I'm sleeping. The only time when you can see what we've really become is when we're fighting." Harry said, looking away. "He's worried that you won't love us anymore if we merge."

"I'll always love him." Tonks stated. "I'm worried that he'll be like *you*."

"He won't be. He'll be an even mix of the him you've seen since the battle under the Ministry and what you've seen of me. He's just worried that you won't like what he's become. It's one of the reasons he's scared to let it happen."

"...Will he remember this conversation?" Tonks asked.

"Not a word of it." Harry said, sighing quietly. "He's dreaming right now. One free from nightmares and visions. Most of his nightmares involve merging with me now and becoming a new Dark Lord. He's scared my personality will be the dominant force. I've tried explaining that that's not how it works, but he won't listen."

"Is there any way to convince him otherwise?"

"I don't know. ...I'm starting to get tired, too. Been working on our core almost since we made it back to the safe house. I need some rest." Harry said, his off-color eye closing.

Tonks sighed, unable to properly process anything she'd just heard. It was only natural that Harry would be scared to merge. She was scared of what might happen if his bad side was the one that gained dominance, too. She didn't want to voice her concern, though. She knew it wasn't healthy for him to have this severe a split personality. He *needed* to merge with his other half, no matter what that meant.

Getting to her feet, Tonks walked over to the door. Dumbledore had long since finished his recap of the fight and was currently speaking with the remaining adults. Those around Tonks' age were grouped on the closer side of the room, talking quietly.

"I'm turning in." She stated. "I have a feeling it's going to be an effort trying to keep Harry resting. I might need a hand tomorrow."

"I'll stop in. I'm always up too early, anyway." Solieyu said.

"That's because you rarely sleep." Luna said, lightly nudging her boyfriend. Solieyu made a sour face in response.

"Thanks. If anything happens, I'll be in touch somehow. I think Harry's going to be okay. His other side came forth for a minute. He's trying to help heal their body. It isn't going too well. It's... been a really long night..." Tonks mumbled.

"Go rest." Hermione said, gently. "We'll tell Professor Dumbledore."

"Thanks." Tonks said, smiling weakly. Turning, she closed the door quietly and crossed the room to change for bed.

Letting her hair and eyes shift back to their real colors, she crawled into bed next to Harry, scooting up close against him. She was going to keep as attached to him overnight as she could manage. If he woke up for any reason, she wanted to know. She was almost certain he wouldn't try shifting away. In fact, she was quite certain that Harry's other half would prevent it from happening if he tried.

Nestling her nose against the side of his neck, Tonks blew out a long sigh. "I hope you live to see the end of this war, Harry. Because I don't know if I could keep going if you died..."

The silence of the room was only broken by the faint sounds coming from the main room. Harry's breathing was slow, though slightly irregular. It wasn't very easy to drift off to sleep. But sleep did eventually come for Tonks, who hoped that Harry would be feeling more like himself come morning's light.

*'Idiots...'* She thought as sleep washed over her. *'You're both changing each other...'*

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Sure enough, after sleeping an entire day, Harry finally woke up. It occurred around two in the afternoon. Everyone was either in class or eating a late lunch. Coughing, Harry rubbed his throat and headed across the Pit. Calling up for a glass of cold water in the dining room, he slowly let the liquid slide down his throat, wincing as it went. It wasn't helping his headache, but at least his throat didn't feel like someone had been rubbing it with sandpaper.

"Star, you there?" Harry asked, walking with his half-empty goblet back into the main room. "How long's everyone been gone?"

"About an hour." Came the beholder's voice. One of his smaller eyestalks poked out of the hole in the ceiling. "Why is one of your eyes blue?"

"We've reached an agreement." Harry stated, eyebrows raising as he closed his eyes and took another sip of his drink. "I'll explain more when everyone gets back, though."

"I see. How are you feeling? I heard you were in quite a battle." Said Stargazer, finally floating down and into the room properly.

"I've been better. I'm healing quicker than I should be, but it still isn't fast enough for my liking. I'm worried something might happen and I won't be able to help." Harry stated, walking around to sit on the couch.

"You can't be everywhere." Said the beholder. "Sometimes it's wiser to remain behind and heal fully than to rush into combat half-dead and be a detriment to your side."

"Perhaps." Harry said. "But I can't change who I am or how I operate. It's like it's an intrinsic thing to me, wanting to save people."

Stargazer bobbed slightly. "Then the best--"

"*HARRY!*"

Harry and Stargazer turned around as Hermione burst in, panting.

"What's wrong?" Asked Harry, getting back to his feet.

"Luna...! They have Luna!" Hermione said, walking over to lean against the back of the couch.

"Who has Luna? Hermione, you're going to need to calm--" Harry began.



"Two Gryffindors!" Hermione cried, looking up. "They're supporters of that Demetra girl that attacked Leon! They heard she was scheduled to be moved to Scrimgeour's holding facility..."

"His what?"

"...And they wanted one last shot at getting revenge! They were yelling about Iscariot and how, since Demetra failed her job, they had been tapped to finish the job. And they're going to start by killing Luna in front of him! They're trying to make him lose control, Harry!" Hermione explained, barely breathing through her whole explanation.

"...Show me." Harry said, tossing his empty goblet to the side.

"Do you think you'll be able to do anything?" Asked Hermione.

"Oh..." Harry began, a smile crossing his face. "I think we'll do alright..."

Hermione led Harry towards the Entrance Hall as fast as she could. En route, Harry asked what the devil Hermione had meant when she had said 'Scrimgeour's holding facility.' Apparently, the announcement had been made the day that Harry was recovering - the Minister had been working on plans for a new prison to hold criminals in for some time. He had finally finished the job and was sending word out. Dumbledore hadn't said where the place was, what it looked like, or what its capacity would be. But it was better than nothing, to be sure.

Dumbledore had then explained to the students that this meant that the criminal in their own school, Demetra Aethon, would be transferred that evening. Apparently, the two Gryffindors, both seventh-years, had taken this to mean that they would have to pick up where Demetra had now failed. If she was being moved off-site, it meant she would no longer have a chance. And it seemed that these Gryffindors were more vindictive than Demetra had been.

By the time they reached the Entrance Hall, Harry was mentally conversing with himself over what the best course of action would be. The two Gryffindors were standing up the first flight of stairs nearby, barking orders and warning that if anyone tried anything, the girl

would die. One was holding Luna and had his wand up to her temple. Down below, Solieyu was hunched forward, fangs beared, eyes a burning gold color. Now that his secret was out, he didn't seem to care who saw him angry.

"What do we do?" Hermione whispered, glancing aside at Harry. "If we try anything..."

"They'll kill her." Harry finished, narrowing his eyes. "They really picked a bad day to piss me off."

"Harry? What are you going to do?" Hermione asked.

Glancing at his friend, Harry smiled. "Teach them what happens to those who try attacking my friends."

Hermione glanced down, seeing Harry's hands slowly being encased by the unmistakable light of the Patronus Armor. In a hurried voice, she hissed, "You can't! Your magical core is already damaged, Harry! If you push yourself--"

"We'll be fine." Harry said, stepping back so no one would notice the Armor activating. Only now did Hermione realize something was odd with Harry's eye color. "We'll explain later. For now..."

Harry shifted, walking through the space between the end of the hallway and where Solieyu was standing. Leaning in close to his friend's ear, Harry whispered, "Calm down. I'm here now. I'll get her back."

Growling quietly, Solieyu replied under his breath. "You should be resting! I'll get her back on my own!" And then, raising his voice, he practically roared, "If you don't let her go, I'll make you *wish* I had killed you!"

Seeing that the vampire was going to be impossible to deal with in his current state, Harry turned his attention to the two Gryffindor assailants. The one holding Luna was tall and bulky, while the other one was rather scrawny-looking. Blocking their idiotic ramblings from his mind, Harry manually crossed the Entrance Hall and walked up

the stairs. When he was near Luna, he once more leaned in close to whisper, "Get ready. This might be a little rough."

"You say something?" Snapped the bulky Gryffindor, glaring at Luna.

"No. Nothing." Luna said, her calm voice hiding just how shaken she really was.

Just then, Harry's voice could be heard throughout the entire area. "How many times do you have to see our powers before it sinks in? How much damage do we need to cause before you learn? How many of you pathetic little worms do we have to step on before the message becomes crystal clear? No one attacks my friends. Especially not within the walls of Hogwarts!"

Just then, a glowing hand appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Luna by the shoulder. The light spread over Luna's body almost instantly. And once it had, she simply wasn't there anymore. Harry had shifted her through. Smiling, Harry moved his hand down to take Luna's. "Are you alright?"

Squeezing his hand, Luna nodded. "I'm... I'm alright. Thank you, Harry. But you shouldn't be doing this. You're still hurt."

"We're well enough to keep a friend from being harmed. Come on. I have to keep hold of you or you'll shift back in. Let's get you back down to Leon." Harry said.

As they walked down the stairs, Luna asked, "What's going to happen to those two?"

Harry just smiled at that. When they were near the staff (and more importantly, Solieyu, Harry let Luna shift back in. She seemed a bit disorientated for a moment before turning and latching onto Solieyu as tightly as she could. For his part, Solieyu seemed stunned for the briefest of moments. Then his arms flew around the girl and tugged her closer.

As Harry turned and walked back up the stairs, he let his voice resound through the Entrance Hall again. "Do you know the name the Gadarene demon more commonly is known by? Surely you do."

The scrawny Gryffindor looked stunned, as did his bulkier companion. Finally, the scrawny one responded, "...Legion. Why do you ask...?"

"Do you know why it called itself Legion?" Harry asked, shifting back in just in front of the two Gryffindors, who let out surprised squawks and stumbled back a few feet.

"What are you getting at, Potter?!" Growled the bulkier one. "What does a demon from the Bible have to do with any of this?!"

"You'll see soon enough." Harry said, a smile splitting his face. He rushed forward, grabbing the scrawny one by the head, his fingers extending to fully wrap around it. His other arm shot out, extending far enough to do the same thing to the other boy. "And you won't like one minute of it."

As the Gryffindors let out screams, Harry shifted with the both of them.

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Nearly fifteen minutes later, Harry came walking back into the Entrance Hall, no longer with the Armor active. He looked incredibly tired, though he had a satisfied smirk on his face. Tonks was the first to rush over. Once she reached him, she reeled back and slugged him in the right arm as hard as she could.

"Ga-- OWW! Damn it, woman, what the hell was *that* for?!" Harry cried out, clutching his sore arm.

"For using the Armor when you aren't supposed to be doing any magic at all, you *JACKASS*!" Tonks yelled. Grabbing Harry firmly by the shoulders, she actually shook him back and forth while continuing, "What part of 'rest and don't do anything' don't you get?!"

Solieyu ran over, looking much better than he had when Harry had seen him a short while ago, and pulled Tonks away. She looked like an angry alley cat that was just begging to attack something. "Berate him later! He's alright! At least he *looks* alright. How are you feeling?"

"Be feeling better if Nym hadn't bruised the crap out of my arm..." Harry muttered. Glancing up, he made a face. "Other than that? Bit

tired. Bit sore. Neck won't stop aching. Up there near where it attaches to my skull. Up where you can't pop the pain away. Other than all of that? Doin' alright. Better than those two."

"What did you do to them?" Dumbledore asked, walking over. "And *where* are they?"

"Down in Demetra's cell. Figured if she was getting moved, her little friends could be moved with her. Why didn't you tell me Scrimgeour was so close to completing a new prison?" Harry asked.

"He only told *me* the morning I made the announcement. I must say, he's quite good at keeping secrets." Dumbledore said, looking apologetic. "What state did you leave those boys in, Harry?"

"Oh, they'll live." Harry said dismissively. "They'll never be able to hold a wand again, but they'll live."

"*Harry...*" Dumbledore said, warningly.

"Hey, I'm sure you can still save their fingers and thumbs if you get down there quick enough. I'm just saying - they needed to be taught a lesson. It isn't nice to point your wand at someone if you don't have the guts to follow through with a threat." Harry said, his voice growing colder as he spoke.

Sighing, Dumbledore took off in the direction of Demetra's cell. Harry watched him go, a smirk on his face.

"You didn't have to do that." Solieyu said.

"No. But it certainly felt good." Harry replied, turning back to his friends. "Luna, you alright? Sorry if the shifting hurt or something. I was thinking on the fly."

"It felt fine." Luna said, smiling. "It was very interesting. Does that other side of the school have a name?"

"Not that I know of." Harry said. "I'll have to ask Dobby sometime."

It was about then that Harry felt like someone was staring intently at the back of his head. Slowly looking over his shoulder, it was to find Hermione standing there doing just that. He spun around quickly, taking a few steps back.

"Uh... Hermione?" He said slowly.

"Your right eye is blue. *That's* what was off. It didn't click until you'd taken those two Iscariot people away!" Hermione said, pointing at the eye in question.

"Hm? Oh, yes. That. Well, I suppose now's as good a time as any. Would you guys round the others up? I'm going to go flop down on the couch in the Pit." Harry said.

"Are you going to *stay* there this time?" Tonks asked, huffing.

"Yes, Nym, I promise. I'll stay there and rest until you and that doting old bat tell me it's fine for me *not* to." Harry said, rolling his eyes.

A few minutes later, Harry had everyone gathered in the Pit. He had been pondering how to tell them this long before he had awakened that day. He and his other side had been having a little heart to heart during the recovery period. Like Harry had told Stargazer, who had a pair of eyestalks poking out of his room in the ceiling, they had reached an agreement.

"Right. So I'm sure you all know why you're here, yeah?" Harry asked. "I'll keep this quick. I want to be there when Dumbledore moves Demetra and those two idiots."

"You never let us see any of the fun parts." Drawled Malfoy, who was slumped down in one of the corner chairs.

"While I was convalescing, I had a talk with my other side. We've reached a decision in regard to who gets to be in control at any given time." Harry explained.

"And?" Asked Ginny.

"We decided to split the difference and have both of us active at once." Harry said, crossing his arms and nodding slowly.

"...Run that by us again. Maybe make more sense of it." Pansy suggested, blandly.

"It's... difficult." Harry said, brow creasing. "Normally, when I'm active, he's dormant and unable to control any of our movement. Same in reverse. But this way, we're *both* active. What that means is, effectively, I'm running with two distinct sets of thoughts going on at once. It's been a bit difficult to sort out. I'm not saying I'm going to merge with him yet - this is only a trial period. He understands that. For the most part, he's satisfied to keep one eye out for things and warn me of any danger while I take action to it. I'd say it's like being a part of a two-man team, with one always watching the other's back, but... he has the same range of vision I do. Like I said, it's difficult to explain."

"I'm surprised he's getting that much leeway from you." Said Tonks.

"He's changed. I think I have, too. At least in a way. We... have talked a lot since the Forest happened. I've not slept a whole lot. I've just been shutting down as best I can and meditating like I used to do when Boris was alive. He's agreed that if I allow him to be more in control than he was, he'd help me tap into a portion of the wild magic he's been holding at bay. That's why I was able to use the Armor. The tear in my core isn't healed, but it's no longer a crack. It's... like a cut that's started to heal over. The skin on the top is pulling together from either side, but you can still see and feel the roughness there. If that makes sense." Harry explained.

"Not really. But we'll take your word for it." Pansy stated.

"It *does* leave me exhausted, though. Only reason it took so long to get back up to the Entrance Hall was because I had to stop a few times on the way to rest." Harry muttered, scowling.

"He means that we had to sit down, as our legs were shaking." Harry added in a distinctly different voice.

"Oh great, both sides can talk freely now. *That* won't get confusing at all." Solieyu said, raising an eyebrow.

"He also promised to *try* not making any smart-assed comments." Harry grumbled darkly. "But I'm trying to meet him halfway here. So I hope he does the same. So in short, we're both going to be active at once. We'll be healing faster, but we're going to get tired at a much faster rate. One of the reasons I agreed to this was because I'll need time to heal. Even with his help, this is a serious problem. What happened earlier didn't rip the tear open all the way, but there are a few small spots that opened back up. Worth the risk, if you ask me. Good test of my power."

"Says you." Said Tonks. "You realize that after pulling that little stunt, you're not going to leave the Pit for any reason for a week, right? I'll skip class and monitor you myself if I have to."

"She's scary when she's assertive." Pansy stage-whispered to Malfoy, who nodded.

"Quiet, you." Tonks said, giving Pansy the evil eye.

"I promise that after we watch Demetra and company get moved out of the school I won't leave the Pit until the crack in my magical core is fully healed over. Okay?" Harry said, walking over and putting his arms around Tonks.

"...Okay. But you better mean it." Tonks said.

"So... who wants to go with me to wait for the big move? Gonna have to grill Dumbledore to get some info out of Scrimgeour. Can't believe neither of us were let in on this." Harry said.

"The Minister must have wanted absolute secrecy." Said Hermione.

"Even to us? He knows we're trustworthy." Harry said.

"Yes, but he's also aware of the rumor mill at Hogwarts. Word *does* spread eerily fast even when it's supposed to be a secret." Ginny said. "It's one of those big mysteries of the school. No one ever knows who first hears the rumor or how it gets started, but it always spreads."



"Probably the paintings." Malfoy said. "They get a bit...chatty."

"I think the two of us will decline your invitation if it's all the same to you." Solieyu said.

"We're going to go up to the Nest and try to relax. My muscles are still a bit tense..." Luna said, offering an apologetic smile.

"I figured you'd do something like that. I understand completely. I think the both of you could do with a bit of quiet time after what happened." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "I'm glad I could help."

"So are we." Solieyu said. Luna glanced up at him and nodded towards the door. He nodded and the two headed out. "We'll be back down for dinner, providing we don't sleep through it. Not good for my health when I get that worked up..."

"If you don't show up for too long, I'll send someone up there to check up on you. So you'd best be careful not to be in any embarrassing situations." Harry said, a teasing grin on his face.

"One of these days, I'll take a page from Tonks' book and slug you in the arm for comments like that." Solieyu mumbled, shaking his head.

Harry laughed as the two left. When the door shut behind them, Harry immediately staggered. Tonks, still near him, was quick to help him get his balance back.

"What's wrong?" She asked, frowning.

"Little tired." Harry said, groaning quietly. "I was trying to put on a good show so those two wouldn't worry. But that damned stunt really drained my energy. I still want to go wait for Demetra and those other two get taken away, though. Maybe... just sitting at the base of the stairs, though."

"You sure you're up for the walk?" Tonks asked.

"No. But since when has that ever stopped me before? Just... everyone be ready to do something if I start to fall over, yeah?"

"Does snickering count?" Asked Malfoy, getting to his feet.

"Only if you want me to ask the twins to come back to the school this weekend specifically to unleash a new supply of pranks on you." Harry said, glaring weakly at the blonde.

"Hm... I'm conflicted. To laugh, or to be laughed at?" Malfoy pondered aloud.

"While you sit and ponder the meaning of life, we're gonna get going. Probably take me awhile to escorted up there anyway." Harry said. "Nym, you gonna be okay helping me lumber about for a bit?"

"If I don't, who will?" Tonks replied, pulling her wand. "Alright, you lot. Let's help our resident idiot out to watch the vampire hunter and her fingerless cohorts get toted off to whatever godforsaken hole in the ground our new Minister's decided to chuck them in!"

"She's cranky today, isn't she?" Whispered Ginny to Hermione.

"Overprotective, I think." Replied Hermione in an equally quiet voice.

"Hop to it! Malfoy, are you gonna stand there looking like a Hufflepuff all day or are you coming with us?" Barked Tonks.

Raising an eyebrow, Malfoy promptly cast a glance aside at Pansy, who smirked. Rolling his eyes, Malfoy slid his hands into his pockets. "I'm coming, I'm coming. But if he falls over and breaks his nose, I'm still going to laugh."

Stargazer watched Tonks lead the small group out of the Pit. When the door was closed behind the last one out, he floated back up towards his hole in the ceiling.

"They're crazier than most of my kind are..."

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## Chapter 20 – Running Out of Time

A quintet of Aurors had shown up later that day. Dumbledore had escorted them to Demetra's cell. Dumbledore had indeed saved the digits of the Gryffindor boys, though he had muttered that Harry wasn't going to be allowed any more stunts like that again. Harry had just smirked at that. He would get away with whatever he wanted and he knew it. This was merely the first part of a test that would continue over the upcoming summer holidays. He was hoping it would be less... draining... at that point.

Demetra had been taken out in magical shackles, as had the two Gryffindors. When they arrived back in the Entrance Hall, Harry had quietly called out to Demetra. When she looked over, he offered her a tired smile. She had stared at him for awhile before blowing out a sigh and closing her eyes. She had seen every moment of him attacking the two boys, she had been given an explanation of what had happened. Harry had bound the two to the walls that neither the door nor Demetra were on.

He would see to it that she would be given a fair trial. He wasn't sure he ever got through to her, though. And in the end, that's what left Harry feeling more melancholy than anything else. After the trio had been taken to the edge of the school's wards, the Aurors apparated away with them. Dumbledore returned shortly. A small crowd had gathered to watch the vampire hunters from Iscariot being toted away. Dumbledore sent them on their way before walking over to Harry. He asked how the Ravenclaw was. Harry had responded truthfully - he was exhausted.

Once the headmaster had taken his leave, Harry asked his entourage to help him get safely back to the Pit, where he had resigned to stay for the next seven days. Cabin fever would do nothing to help him, even if the rest would. And while he always had Stargazer to talk to, it wasn't the same. He missed Boris greatly. He missed being able to slip into Parseltongue and just talk quietly to the snake in the middle of a crowded room.

The large group broke down after Harry let himself flop down on the Pit's couch. Some wanted to go get some food, others needed to go and study. Malfoy said that he had Quidditch duties to attend to. Harry also heard him mutter darkly that the game just wasn't fun now that Harry didn't play. Now there was a chuckle-worthy thought. Malfoy missed his rival.

Eventually, everyone but Harry and Tonks had left. Tonks threw herself on the couch next to Harry, then swung her legs to stretch them up and over his lap.

"Long week." She said, letting her head tilt back.

"No kidding." Harry murmured. "Another interesting Christmas season. Did you notice how packed the school was this year? Not many people went home."

"Probably ordered to stay by their parents." Tonks replied. "Too dangerous to be traveling these days."

"Yeah. How you holding up, Nymmy?" Harry asked. "Aside from being perpetually worried about me, I mean."

"Oh, I'm alright. Just tired. I can't imagine what it's like for you. I get tired just watching you do this shit. How you haven't collapsed from complete exhaustion more often is thoroughly beyond me." Tonks said, gesturing vaguely in the air as she closed her eyes. "It's really damn hard being your girlfriend."

"You knew what you were getting into." Harry said, grinning. "I am sorry, though. Everything's building up now, though. Once I get better..."

"You're going to attack the Citadel. I know." Tonks said, looking up at the ceiling.

"I want you to stay behind. Before you protest, because I know you will... you *have* to. If you come along, I'll never be able to focus. I'll be constantly worried that something might happen to you. Does that make any sense? I know I'm rambling a bit. In a bit of a daze at the

moment. My body really wants me to go back to bed..." Harry trailed off, sighing.

"It makes sense, Harry. I don't like it, but... I know you're right. It's going to be hard letting you go, though. If you don't come back..." Tonks said, trailing off as well.

"I promise I'll come back." Harry said, reaching over and putting one of his hands over one of Tonks'. "I'll make sure everyone comes back safe and sound, alright? Just find something to keep your mind occupied and we'll be back before you know it."

"If I went off to fight some ungodly abomination on a floating island that's guarded by soul eating creatures that now come in three flavors, would *you* be able to keep your mind off of being worried?" Asked Tonks in as dry a tone as she could muster.

"Point taken, dear. But you know what I mean. I'm no good with advice. I'm better at listening. And I haven't done much of that lately." Harry said. "Wanna go stretch out in bed and just skip the rest of the day?"

"Depends. You gonna fall asleep five minutes after we lay down?" Asked Tonks.

"Nah. If I stop talking for any length of time, just douse me with some ice water." Chuckled Harry.

"Hm. Alright, deal. No thinking about anything else. Let's just go and talk for awhile. Seems we haven't got a chance to just talk about meaningless crap in a year or two now." Tonks said, getting up with a groan.

Harry winced as he got up. "Okay, I know the saying goes 'You're only as young as you feel' right? Well, I feel like a ninety year-old with lower back problems..."

"Gonna ache when you lay down then." Tonks said.

"Ugh... this sucks." Muttered Harry.

"You bring it on yourself, Harry." Tonks said, patting Harry on the head. When he took a wide swat at her, she giggled and ran off towards the bedroom.

Glancing aside at the fireplace as he started to walk, Harry mumbled in Parseltongue, "*Women.*"

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Unfortunately, despite his best ideas going towards healing, Harry remained weakened for over a month. It wasn't until the end of January that he started to feel like his power had returned to him. Around that time, Madam Pomfrey had given him a clean bill of health, saying that while his magical core looked fine now, he should still be careful for awhile. Harry took this with a grain of salt, as he had been using magic for a week without any strain or exhaustion coming with it.

Dumbledore had finally been told about Scrimgeour's new prison, as well. Apparently, it had been constructed in a similar manner to Azkaban, save that this one was underground. He was keeping the location hidden for now, and Harry fully understood why. The fact that he was willing to say anything about it rather surprised him. Not surprising was that there were over a hundred prisoners currently being stored in it. Not much was said about how they were keeping them all in check without the Dementors around, though Scrimgeour had cryptically stated that an uprising was an impossibility.

For awhile, everything was going well. Classes went smoothly and, despite some of them boring him to tears, Harry did well in keeping up with everything. He'd felt nothing from his scar ever since the attack, which was both a good and a bad thing. The odd thing was that the Order was reporting that the Death Eaters seemed to have mysteriously left the country entirely. A few had obviously remained behind at the Citadel, presumably, but most were off in Germany for some reason.

Harry still remembered Snape's words. But despite his best attempts to research Sergei Wagner, the only thing he found in relation to the man was that, when he was alive, he was one of the strongest wizards in Germany. He had done a good deal for German wizarding

communities in regards to wizard-Muggle relations. He had quelled a few dark wizards, none of real note. So what the hell had Snape mentioned him for? Whenever he had asked Dumbledore, the headmaster had simply told Harry that Wagner was of no importance. Harry knew that was a lie. But without anything to go by, he decided to let it slide. He was going to need to check the library at Number Twelve that summer.

He knew it was all building to something, but he wouldn't find out until early February, when another vision-like dream left him in disarray. It had been an utterly exhausting day, with Tonks dragging Harry down to the lake for some fresh air. This had somehow led into a picnic with all their friends. That, in turn, had led to an epic food fight. Harry wasn't entirely sure that a bit of cake wasn't still hiding for its life in his hair, despite having washed it twice since.

He found himself walking the darkened halls of Azkaban. He knew them well now. He had a direct route to Balthazar's room, which was why he figured he was there now. Clearly, the old ghost had contacted him. It was the first time in awhile. He knew the Soul was getting weak. But he hadn't counted on hearing or seeing what he did.

Balthazar was sitting on the floor next to the pedestal that held his gemstone. He looked disheveled and was shaking, which seemed like an odd thing for a ghost to be doing. Harry walked over and knelt by him.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"No..." Replied the ghost in a weak voice. "He is still using me to cycle negative energy. The island is sustained... and has been for a long time now... I can only assume he is doing this to weaken me. It... is working."

"That's not good." Harry muttered, swearing under his breath.

"It is... January? February?" Asked Balthazar, glancing up. His eyes, if it was possible for a ghost, looked sunken.

"The fourth of February." Harry said, nodding once.

Balthazar went silent at that, glancing back down. Drawing in a slow breath, he whispered, "I feel... that if I do not escape this place soon... the gem will shatter before the middle of March. This is... if he does not decide to channel a large amount of energy through it, mind you. You do not have much time, Harry Potter. I beg of you... get me out of this place... we do not have much time left..."

"Middle of March...?" Harry repeated, feeling as though someone had knocked the wind out of him. "That's... no, that's too soon! I need more time!"

"I am afraid it is time I cannot give you..." Balthazar said, smiling apologetically. "I am very weak. If I were to be removed from this place, I would be able to recover naturally. The fact that he is regularly channeling energy through my gem, however... it is taking a large amount of energy just to speak with you right now. But... it was imperative that you knew how much time was left... I am sorry, Harry Potter..."

"It isn't your fault. It's *his*." Growled Harry, glanced over his shoulder, as though expecting Voldemort to be looming there. "I'll let everyone know. And I promise, I'll get you out before it's too late. Just... try and hang on, alright? Don't send any more visions. I've got the route to you down, I know how much time we have, give or take. I'll figure something out. You just try to rest, okay?"

Balthazar nodded slowly. "Godspeed, boy. I pray you reach me in time. His power is growing every day and his plans grow more unholy as time progresses. He is... he is dabbling with the undead..."

"The undead?" Harry asked, brow creasing. "What do you mean?"

Balthazar spoke, but no voice escaped his mouth. Frowning, the old ghost tried again. A silent sigh escaped his lips before he extended a hand out towards Harry. Harry began to bring one of his own up, but suddenly found himself jerking upright in bed. His eyes scanned the bedroom quickly, his disorientation fixing itself within moments. But even after getting a grasp on where he was, he felt terrible.

"Harry?" Tonks murmured in a groggy voice. "What's wrong? Nightmare?"



"He's dying." Harry said, bringing a hand up to his head. "If we don't get Balthazar out by the middle of March at the latest... the Soul is going to shatter..."

"What...?" Breathed Tonks, sitting up. "Harry, you..."

"I don't cry." Harry said, staring straight ahead and ignoring his own eyes betraying him. "I promised him I'd save him, but... I don't know if I can... not like this."

Tonks leaned in, wrapping her arms around Harry and tugging him against her. "Hey, what happened to all that bravado? I thought you were gonna get the job done no matter what. In and out and everyone returns safely and all that."

"I thought I had enough time to get stronger." Harry said, closing his eyes and allowing himself to lean against Tonks. "Now, though... I don't have any time left. I'm still not back to full from fighting that Dominus and saving Luna..."

"You'll figure something out, Harry." Whispered Tonks, kissing the top of his head. "You'd better go tell Dumbledore, though. This is important. I'll go with if you want."

"I... yeah, I think I need someone to come with me. My thoughts are a mess right now. I might run into a wall." Harry laughed weakly.

The two slipped out of bed and quickly got dressed. The entire trip to the headmaster's office, Harry had his hands in his pockets and looked to be in deep thought. Tonks had to grab him by the shoulders and aim him a different way twice so he wouldn't run into anything. When they reached the gargoyles guarding the room, Harry glanced aside at Tonks.

"We can sit here guessing sweets for an hour or we can shift just inside. Staying here or coming with me?" He asked.

"No choice in the matter, huh? You're going whether I agree to it or not?"

"More or less. I don't have time to sit here playing games." Harry stated.

"Take me with you, then." Tonks said, sighing.

Harry nodded, invoking the Armor. Taking hold of Tonks' hands, the silver light quickly enveloped her as well. Harry had tried not to use the Armor much since the incident in London, so it felt a little off to him. Rusty, almost. Mentally scowling, he quickly helped Tonks to the other side of the wall and shifted them both back in, letting the Armor drop almost immediately.

"Going to take awhile to get the cobwebs out of that." He grumbled, climbing the stairs. At the top, he rapped on the door.

"Enter." Came Dumbledore's voice.

Harry did as he was instructed, one eyebrow raised. "Why on earth are you even awake right now?"

Dumbledore smiled from behind his desk, a small mountain of paperwork strewn about it. "You'd be surprised. To what do I owe this visit? Has something happened?"

"Balthazar's dying." Harry said, getting straight to the point. As Tonks went and sat down, Harry started to pace aimlessly around the room. "Basically? We have a little over a month until the Soul shatters."

"That is grim news, indeed." Dumbledore said, brow creasing. "...But that isn't all that's bothering you, is it?"

"Voldemort's doing something with the undead." Harry said, looking at Dumbledore.

"What?" Tonks said. "You didn't say anything about that."

"We're aware." Said Dumbledore.

"You are?" Asked Harry. "What's going on that you haven't told me about?"

"I'm not going to say anything just yet. I hope you understand. I'm trying not to put more on your plate, Harry. And, as it stands, nothing has come of it. The Death Eaters are out in Germany, as they seem to think we aren't following them. Rest assured, if any of them actually do start to go through with their plans, whatever they may be, we will stop them before it gets out of hand." Dumbledore explained.

"Does this have anything to do with Sergei Wagner?" Harry asked.

"I pray it never will." Dumbledore said, his tone grave. "Wagner is not someone I would ever care to meet."

"I couldn't find anything about him. And believe me, I looked. Who is he?" Harry asked, walking towards the desk.

Dumbledore scanned Harry's face a moment before sighing. Pulling off his spectacles, Dumbledore asked, "Do you know what inferi are, Harry?"

"Reanimated corpses." Harry replied. "Of course I do."

"*Mindless* reanimated corpses." Corrected Dumbledore.

"...Wait, what? Why bring up 'mindless?'" Tonks asked. "They're the walking dead. How could they...?"

"Necromancy." Dumbledore said, quietly. "An inferius is effectively nothing more than a puppet used by Dark wizards. Usually, they do little more than guard a place. They do their job quite well, as they never have to eat, drink, sleep, or anything else the living would. They attack when you get within range. However, inferi are not the only type of undead."

"I've only heard rumors. Nothing solid. Bit hard to find out about things like that in Hogwarts." Harry said, shrugging. "But yes, I know there are more than one type of undead. So what does this have to do with Wagner?"

"My next question," Dumbledore continued, ignoring the question, "is quite simple in comparison. Do you know what a lich is?"

"...I don't think I like where this is going." Harry said.

"Nor should you. Which is why this should end here for now. The less said about Sergei Wagner, the better. Leave this matter to the Order, Harry. Back to the more pressing matter - the Soul is in danger." Dumbledore said. "Meaning we must up the schedule."

"But I'm not back to full yet..." Harry said, looking troubled. "If something goes wrong..."

"If something goes wrong, we will improvise. One thing remains a problem, however - we have no idea where the Citadel currently is. I need to ask something of you, Harry, but I fear it may weaken you slightly more." Dumbledore said, putting his spectacles back on.

"What is it?" He asked.

"We know that Balthazar's spirit can contact you. But have you ever tried contacting *him*?" Asked Dumbledore.

"...Of course not. I wouldn't know where to begin." Harry said. "Why, do you have a method?"

"I believe that the magical currents are the key. Now let me begin by saying that I have no idea if this will actually work. But it is worth a try, at the very least. What harm, as they say, could it do? I want you to try and concentrate on the Soul, Harry. Try to find a current with the spirit's magical signature on it. Once you have that, perhaps you will be able to trace it back to its source. If you can, you will be able to provide us with the exact location of the Citadel." Dumbledore explained.

"I... can give it a shot. I'll meditate and try to clear my head beforehand. It might help out. Not gonna promise any results, you understand." Harry said.

"Of course. And it's perfectly fine if you cannot use this method. It is merely an idea this old man thought might be of some use." Dumbledore said, smiling. "I wish you the best of luck, however. If you can pinpoint the island's location, it will speed the process along substantially."

"No pressure, of course." Chimed Tonks.

"Yeah, no pressure." Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Chuckling, Dumbledore got to his feet, wincing as something popped loudly. "Oof. I believe I've been sitting here far longer than is recommended. I may go for a walk to stretch my muscles a bit. Breakfast will be in a little over two hours, if you would like to go and get some more rest."

"I don't think he'd be able to go to sleep without being drugged." Tonks said. "I had to keep him from smashing into walls on the way up, he was so deep in thought."

"I had a lot to think about." Harry said, shrugging crookedly. "But yeah, I don't think I'll be able to get anymore sleep. I may go give tracing Balthazar's spiritual signature a shot, though."

"Very well. If you make any progress by breakfast, feel free to let me know." Dumbledore said. "Incidentally, did you two actually guess the password down below?"

"Shifted past it." Harry said. "Quicker."

"That still feels really weird." Tonks said. "How long'd it take you to get used to it?"

"I never felt that odd, to be honest. Anyway, I think I'll go try to find the blasted Citadel. Might as well. If I don't do *something*, I'll pace a hole in the floor. And then Draco would never let me hear the end of it." Harry said.

"Very well, then. I will see you two off." Dumbledore said. "And good luck in your attempt, Harry."

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Try though he might, Harry made absolutely no progress that morning. Chalking it up to being tired, he decided to try again later and, perhaps, get a nap somewhere along the way. His nap turned into a three hour long rest. He was initially irritated when he finally got up,

as he had asked no fewer than four people to wake him up after an hour. In the end, he gave up, citing the fact that he was probably going to burn through a good deal of energy anyway.

When Tonks went to bed that night, Harry sealed himself up in the training room, just as he had when Boris had taught him Occlumency. Sitting in the middle of the floor, Harry closed his eyes and started to breathe deeply. It would have been so much easier with someone to talk theoretics on. But he didn't want to bore Tonks, Dumbledore already had enough to worry about, and he wasn't going to spout potentially hare-brained schemes to his other friends.

Clearing his head proved harder than he remembered it being. He hadn't actively needed to do so in a good many months. Blowing out a slow breath, Harry thought back to his encounter that morning. Dumbledore wanted him to try finding Balthazar's spiritual signature and to try following it back, huh? Easier said than done.

For nearly an hour, Harry tried to remember something about Balthazar that stood out; something that would give him a lead to go on. But it never came. Feeling frustrated, he laid back and stared up at the ceiling in a daze.

"Well, I'm out of ideas. What about you? You've been pretty damned quiet today." Harry said, eyes shifting to the left.

"I think," Came a different voice from somewhere within. "That we need to ask Dobby."

"So you're lost on the matter but don't want to admit it. Gotcha. Good to know we're functioning on the same wavelength for once." Harry groused. "I don't want to call on Dobby for this. It should be something we can do by ourselves, dammit."

"Should be." Came the reply. "Isn't."

"Look, let's just switch, alright? We'll fry a bit less of our energy if we switch up every hour or so. One of us has to have a breakthrough, right?"

"Very well. Back out. I'll helm this vessel of stupidity." Came the irritated voice.

"Try not to run aground." Harry said, rolling his eyes before letting his other side gain full control.

Sitting back up, Harry just shook his head before closing his now blue-twinged eyes. "This is gonna take all damned night."

Unfortunately, Harry's more violent half proved to be mostly correct. For hours, the two sides would alternate being in control, with the hope that one would be able to try and think of something. Or, at the very least, to analyze the data being picked up on - which was admittedly next to nil - and make something of it.

Around three in the morning, when Harry was properly in control of himself, something seemed to click.

"Hey. Hey, you still around?" He asked.

"Where the hell else am I going to go?!" Cried the other voice. "Whitstable?! Yes, I'm going to go to bloody Whitstable. And maybe Peter Cushing's ghost will be out buying some damned phantom vegetables whilst on his bicycle! *Am I still around?* Good lord..."

"Settle down, dammit, I think I've found something!" Harry argued.

"Oh, you've found something! Is it the *point*?"

"It's like Draco and the wine all over again." Harry muttered, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Look, I think I found Balthazar's signature. Now are you going to sit there being a pill or are you going to help me? The sooner we get this done, the sooner we go to bed! I'll even let you skip a day if you so desire. I want this to be done just as much as you!"

"Fine, fine. And yes, I'm keeping you asleep all day tomorrow."

"Today. It's after midnight." Harry corrected.

"*WHATEVER!*" Roared the voice. "Just tell me what you've found!"

Closing his eyes, Harry muttered, "I was trying to make a connection between Balthazar and the magical currents, right? I was searching for the wrong thing. I was trying to find *his* energies. But he's not *alive*. It's all the gem's doing. He trapped himself in it, effectively creating a living artifact."

"Oh god, was it that simple? Great, now I'm as stupid as you. Well done me." Scowled the other voice. "Proceed..."

"If you don't stop it with the snarky commentary, I'll take Pepper-Up for 24 hours straight." Warned Harry. "Now then... like I was saying. I figured that the gem was doing the real work. Given that I have the Eye and that I've more or less seen the Soul itself in these visions, it was a simple matter of scanning for something that felt similar."

"You're making our head hurt." Commented the voice, bitterly. "Enough with technicalities. Can we trace it back to its source or not?"

"We can, but I'm going to need your help. Get up here and share the burden." Harry said. A moment later, he could feel the other side of him rise up and take control of his right eye. "There... now let's get this over with."

The path was broken in places, as there was a lot of open sea to cross. But the arguments that took place as they focused on reaching their destination were forgotten when they finally reached it.

Azkaban was flying a good distance away from the ocean below, but it looked to be stationary. Indeed, the line that Harry had been tracing was one of a tiny number that actually crossed paths with the floating island. Maybe that's why Balthazar's updates were so infrequent - the island had to be intersected with these weak currents.

But even that knowledge was quickly pushed to the back burner. As he drew closer, a sense of dread washed over him.

"Oh no..." He whispered. "That's... not good..."

"An understatement if there ever was one..." Said his other side. "We're in trouble if it's still like this when we make the attack."



"Yeah." Harry agreed. "But... wait. Wait a minute. These lines..."

"Have been cut." Finished the voice. "...Which also means that the island's been here for a long enough time that Voldemort both knows about the currents and has done something to destroy the area where they cross."

"He wanted us to find the Citadel? He's that egotistical?!"

"He wanted us to find the Citadel... he also wanted us to see that we won't be able to shift around his little fortress so long as it's here. The magical currents are all dead in there."

"He can control the currents. Or, at the very least, destroy them." Harry said, sighing.

"He's been waiting for us. He must have noticed something odd with the Soul. And if he followed through on that hunch..."

"Then it's probably a good idea to assume he knows we're trying to resurrect the Gauntlet. And he's... giving us help? Wait, what?"

The voice growled, "He isn't helping us, he's *TAUNTING* us! He's showing us exactly what we want to see because he's confident we won't get out alive! He's letting us know the last bit we needed to prepare for an attack."

"Which means he'll have an ambush prepared. Fantastic." Harry mumbled. "Well shit, now what? Do we still go through with the plan?"

"Of course we do! If he's so sure he'll win, he'll be that much more devastated when we come out on top! And it *does* feel quite good to cram his egotism straight up his pasty ass. We give Dumbledore the knowledge of all of this. He can help formulate a game plan after that. But we are *not* abandoning the idea. We may not be able to shift in, get the Soul, and shift out, but we're *not* helpless! The Armor can still be used. The Defaeco can still be invoked. We're going to render the Dementors extinct."

Harry was silent for a long time after that. "...And the Stone?"

"I knew you were going to ask about that." Said the voice, quietly. "I know you don't like the idea. But it's *PERFECT*. Don't you *SEE* that? What use are they here? They're being used as *batteries*! If anything, we'll be acting as their savior. They'll get their revenge when we do."

"...I'll think about it. But... I still don't think it's worth the price." Harry said, his voice equally quiet. "Let's... let's just go back, alright? I need to think of how to explain this jumbled mess when Dumbledore's awake."

"Let me do it. I can be more succinct about it."

"I... may do that. Thanks. ...Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?"

"Because I have to be. Despite what I've made you do, I think you're coming to realize it now, too. We need to merge. And we need to do it soon."

"...You're just trying to get out of being chained down, aren't you?" Asked Harry. "You're afraid of what the Gauntlet will do."

"Yes. I am. And I'm also afraid of what it might do to *you*. You forget how many times I've given you access to a portion of your wild magic. You forget, it seems, that you only get what I deem necessary. If we were to merge, you'd have access to the whole pool, so to speak. You'd gain a tremendous amount of power. And you wouldn't sit around talking to yourself as much."

"Power I wouldn't be able to control." Harry said.

"You don't know that."

"Yes. I do. Look, let's talk about it later, okay? I just want to get some sleep."

"That's the first smart thing you've said all night."

Opening his eyes, Harry shakily got to his feet. Walking to the training room's door, he pulled it open. The fire was crackling as it always did, and the faint sounds of a beholder sleeping could be heard from the

hole in the ceiling. Normal. An exhausted chuckle escaped his throat as he walked to the couch. Throwing himself down on it, he once more stared up at the ceiling in a daze.

After nearly half an hour, the quiet voice in his head spoke up again. "We aren't going to get any sleep, are we?"

"Not a lick of it."

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## Chapter 21 – Preparation

Harry sat on the Pit's couch, gazing into the fireplace. Tonks was leaning against his left side. It had been a truly horrible, long week. But the worst was yet to come. Tomorrow morning, they would be leaving for the Citadel of Azkaban. The morning after he had figured out what was going on, Harry had explained things to Dumbledore. Dumbledore, in turn, had promptly filled in everyone else. Battleplans were decided on, teams were brought up, and a date had been set. It was sooner than Harry had been expecting. Far sooner. But there was nothing to be done about it.

Harry remembered the meeting quite clearly.

He had been pacing the floor for nearly an hour before everyone had arrived. There, in the kitchen of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, Dumbledore had gathered the core members of the Order, along with Scrimgeour and Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was apparently gearing up to take full command of the Aurors within a month's time. The old leader was bowing out, despite the Minister trying to convince him otherwise.

If nothing else, Harry had been slightly relieved to hear of that turn of events. There was something he liked about Kingsley, he just wasn't sure what it was, though he had a feeling it had something to do with the man's sense of humor. As good a fighter as he was, it hadn't hardened him at all. And, more importantly, Harry *trusted* Kingsley more than he had trusted the former commander. That was especially important now that a game plan was being decided on.

Dumbledore had explained the situation to everyone. And, over the course of several hours, a few things had been decided on. The first was the number of people. With the Order spread thin due to business in Germany, that left a bit of a gap to fill from the Aurors' side of things. Kingsley admitted to not trusting a good deal of his coworkers enough to bring them in on this. There would be no more than twenty-four people on the mission. Others had suggested (even protested) that there be more, but Dumbledore refused. There had to

be enough left behind to continue their work should the group fail its mission.

It was a grim reality that had left the room silent for several minutes. Harry had broken it, asking that the group be split into two teams. One would patrol the air around the island, watching for Domini or any other unexpected menaces. One would land in the courtyard and split up further, with half remaining to keep the area clear while the other went in to extract the Soul.

Harry said he wanted to hand-pick the five that would join him in breaching the Citadel. There wasn't nearly as big an uproar as he had been expecting, though the idea certainly wasn't met with a great deal of excitement and consent, either.

Harry had asked that Dumbledore be there with him due entirely to the fact that they would assuredly run into Voldemort. He also asked that two of his friends be picked out to go with him. When questioned further about this, Harry merely shook his head, saying that his friends would end up coming along one way or another. And, at the very least, this method ensured that he wouldn't have to worry as much.

The last two spots, Harry bowed out and asked Kingsley to fill, saying that he wanted the two toughest fighters the Auror had to offer, as there was no telling what would be waiting for them on their run through the Citadel.

Upon their return to Hogwarts, Harry had gathered everyone in the Pit to relay what had transpired. Considerably more outrage met him, as he expected it would. But even after explaining his reasons, there was still an air of indignity throughout, as though he had called into question each and every one of their magical abilities or lack thereof.

He had picked Malfoy and Solieyu to come with him. Malfoy was more than glad to accept, saying that maybe, just maybe, he would be able to confront his father once and for all. Solieyu accepted, saying that someone had to keep an eye on Harry. Harry had smacked him on the arm for that, asking if the vampire thought he was that big a klutz. Solieyu had only smiled at this, bowing back out of hitting range before giving a firm confirmation.

And while Solieyu had managed to lighten the mood slightly, as the day progressed, reality began to creep back in. The tide of the war would be decided within twenty-four hours. If Harry failed to get the Soul, the Gauntlet would never be reforged and his chances of beating Voldemort would be greatly diminished.

Everyone had parted ways early in the evening. Hermione and Ginny said they had homework to get done, but Harry figured it was an act to cover their worries. Solieyu and Luna had likely retreated up to the Nest again. Malfoy and Pansy had buggered off back to the dungeons. The rumor mill was likely already churning - someone needed to regulate what got back to the other Slytherins.

And so, Harry found himself on the couch, staring miserably at the fireplace while Tonks leaned against him. Neither had said a word for almost an hour. Neither really knew what to say. But someone had to break the ice.

"You know I'll come back alright. Don't you?" Harry said, his voice soft.

"No. I don't." Tonks replied. "This is bigger than anything you've ever done before. You can't promise me you'll succeed. I don't *want* you to promise me you'll succeed."

"Why?"

"Because promises can be broken." Tonks said, sitting up and turning to look at Harry. "I don't want you to act like you aren't being torn up about this. I don't want you to act like you're *okay*. I don't want you to bottle things up. I want you to be *you* tonight."

"I can't." Harry said, looking away. "Because if I start to doubt myself even a little at this point, everything will start to fall apart. I have to think that, no matter what happens, I'll come out on top."

Tonks laughed weakly. "You've never liked being on top."

"Quiet, you." Harry said, giving the girl a withering glare. After awhile, he sighed. "I'm sorry about all of this, Nymmy. I never wanted it to get this bad. I thought... I dunno. I thought I could be this invincible hero

that everyone could count on. I couldn't even keep everyone in Hogsmeade alive."

"Hey, now. What did you just say about self-doubt?" Tonks asked, nudging him. Offering him a small smile, she continued, "I'll try and keep from worrying too much. But you know me."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Nym. I really am." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"Just... come back to me. Alright?" Tonks said, wrapping her arms around Harry. "Don't promise it. Just do it."

Harry nodded, bringing a hand up to clutch at Tonks' arm. "I'll come back. I'll make sure everyone else comes back. I'll keep them from dying. I won't let Tom win..."

Leaning back against him, Tonks laid her head on his shoulder. "I wouldn't mind if you destroyed the whole place after you got the gem out..."

"Neither would I, Nym. But... that brings up something else. Remember back during the party? When I said I had something to tell you that I couldn't tell anyone else?" Asked Harry.

"Vaguely." Tonks said. "I pretty much forgot you said anything. Especially with the attack on London..."

"I think... now's the time to tell you." Harry said.

Tonks looked up, only to see Harry still staring forward, a troubled look on his face. "What is it?"

"I know how to create a new Philosopher's Stone."

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In the Slytherin common room, Malfoy and Pansy were sitting in a secluded corner. Both had their eyes on a pair of seventh years near the fireplace. They had been talking quietly to a handful of younger students. Malfoy had a good idea of what it was about. Pansy glanced down at him.

"Go to her, Draco." She whispered. "I know she must be worried."

"I can't." Malfoy replied. "We need to monitor these idiots. I'm not leaving you here alone with them."

"Blaise is in the other corner, Draco. He's been watching them longer than we have." Pansy argued. "Go see your girlfriend already. Calm her nerves. Let her know you'll come back."

"I might not. I won't tell her I will." Malfoy said, closing his eyes and sinking back in the chair slightly.

"Don't talk like that. I won't listen to it." Pansy spat, glaring down at the blonde. "All the years I've known you, you've never said you'll lose at anything! This is no different."

"This is phenomenally different, Pansy." Malfoy stated, looking up at her. "This is what's going to turn the tide of the war one way or another."

"So?! You're not going to die in some godforsaken hellhole over the ocean! You're going to grow old and become a spiteful old man who hexes kids who come into his yard!" Pansy growled quietly.

"If I don't come back alive..." Malfoy began.

"You will." Pansy interrupted.

"If I don't..." Malfoy repeated. He paused, brow creasing as he searched for the right words. "If I don't, then..."

"I know what you're trying to say." Pansy sighed, leaning over and hugging the blonde. "And I care about you, too. Been my best friend since we were both little. Just promise me you won't die."

"I promise." Said Malfoy, returning the hug.

"After all, who's going to scare the firsties next year if you die?" Asked Pansy, stepping back.

"Pansy..." Malfoy said, frowning as he looked up at her.



The girl turned around quickly. "Who's going to harass Harry if you die? Who's going to save me from Blaise's terrible jokes? Go to her, Draco." Pansy repeated, bringing a hand up to wipe at her eyes. "She's worried about you."

"How can you be so sure?" Asked Malfoy. "We've hardly been what anyone would call a proper couple."

"Because she loves you." Pansy said.

"You don't know that." Malfoy replied.

"Yes I do."

"How so?"

"Because when she left, she looked like what I must look like now." Pansy said.

"What?" Malfoy replied, frowning again.

Just then, a small explosion came from the area near the couch. One of the seventh years had sprung some kind of Weasley-made gadget on the group of younger students, causing them to all look like barnyard animals. Malfoy got to his feet, as did Blaise, but Pansy was across the room before either of the boys could do much of anything. After hexing one in the groin, she grabbed the other by his collar and slammed him back into the wall next to the fireplace.

"You want your bits feeling like a thousand pissed-off ants are biting them, too?" Hissed Pansy.

"N...no ma'am!" Whimpered the seventh year boy, crossing his hands over his crotch.

"Then collect your idiot friend and get the hell off to your dorm!" Barked the girl, jabbing him in the chest with her wand.

"Right!" Squeaked the boy, aiming his wand at his friend and levitating him into the air despite his wheezing protests.

Pansy watched them swiftly exit the room, a fierce look on her face. One that quickly softened as she turned to the younger crowd and asked, "Are you guys alright?"

"Baaaaaaa..." Whined one of the girls, whose head was currently quite sheep-like.

"...Right, I'll ask again when you can talk." Sighed Pansy. Glancing up, she leveled a clearly fake grin Malfoy's way and called, "Hurry up, Draco! Time's running out, after all!"

"...Yeah." Malfoy said, tilting his head slightly. Hands in his pockets, he turned to head towards the exit. Before slipping out, he glanced back at Pansy. She had taken a seat near the partially-transformed kids and was leaning forward on her knees, staring into the fire.

"When the hell did I lose control of everything?" He muttered quietly to himself. "And when did I stop paying attention?"

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At the same time, high above in one of the many towers, Solieyu and Luna were having a very different conversation. It wasn't quite an argument, though many might misconstrue it as such.

"Look," Solieyu said, gesturing vaguely towards the Hogwarts grounds below. "I've told you before... I can't. And I'm not going to."

Luna walked over to stand next to the vampire, smiling up at him. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, Luna. I... look, I appreciate it. Alright? I truly do. You've..." He paused, making a face as the right words failed to come to him.

"I know, Solieyu. I love you, too." Luna said, wrapping her arms around his left one.

"It isn't just that. You've... accepted me. You have to understand, it was one thing for my *friends* to understand and accept my condition. But for someone in love with me to accept it is a completely different

thing entirely. Much less someone who'd be willing to have a child with me. I'm far too scared the cursed genes would be passed along."

"I know. I just thought I'd give you one more chance." Luna said. "You never know, after all."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Solieyu mumbled.

Giggling, Luna shook her head. "I know you'll come back to me, Solieyu. I'm more worried about everyone else. If Harry doesn't get that gemstone back..."

"Yeah. Things are going to be in a bad way. But I trust him." Solieyu said.

"He does seem to have a way to make the impossible possible, doesn't he?" Said Luna, smiling.

"He does." Agreed Solieyu. "I just hope lady luck is on our side when we attack the island. There's so much that could go wrong."

"Whatever happens will happen. Hoping won't change anything." Luna said.

"I'm not sure you've ever said anything that grim before." Solieyu said.

"I'm sorry." Luna said, smiling apologetically. "Times like this are hard for me. I've never been that emotional. Not like the others were, anyway. I remember being sad when my mother died, but I don't remember much other than that. I don't think I ever cried."

"Locking away your feelings subconsciously, maybe? Sort of like what Harry does from time to time?" Asked Solieyu.

"Perhaps." Luna said. "Maybe it's my brain's way of making sure I cope."

"Cope?" Repeated Solieyu. "Wh-- Luna, are you shaking?"

"No." Said Luna. But it was clear that she was. Her thin arms, while not having a tight grip around his arm, could still be felt.

Solieyu tugged Luna against him, lowering his head. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you worry about me all the time. I just..."

Wrapping her arms around his waist, Luna leaned into the embrace. "I had a terrible nightmare the night after Harry chose you and Draco. All three of you were killed. The headmaster was floating you all behind him when everyone returned and you all had this frozen, dead look in your eyes. One of my dorm mates woke me up. She said I was thrashing around and screaming. I don't remember that, though. I just remember my heart racing and... my eyes being wet."

Tightening his grip on the girl, Solieyu whispered, "I won't die, Luna. Harry and Malfoy won't die, either. Harry isn't the type to let anyone get killed when he's around. And Malfoy's ego won't let *him* lose, either."

"And what about you?" Asked Luna.

"I have you." Solieyu replied, kissing the top of the blonde's head. "And that's enough to ensure I won't get killed."

"Solieyu..."

"Shh. Come on. Let's go sit down. It's getting cold out here in the open." Solieyu murmured.

Nodding slightly, Luna stepped away and walked into the little tower, sitting herself down on the couch. Solieyu followed, sitting down beside her. Once he had, she leaned against him and immediately sought out one of his hands.

"Hold me tonight?" She asked, her voice quiet.

"Of course." Solieyu said. "I'll make sure you don't have anymore nightmares."

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Malfoy returned nearly an hour later, looking severely irritated. Upon hearing the commotion occurring in *his* common room, it only worsened. The handful of first and second years were on the ground

in front of the fireplace, tied up. The two seventh years from earlier were back, with a good dozen friends as backup, and had Pansy and Blaise cornered. Malfoy pressed back into the doorway leading into the common room to try and hear what was going on.

"-- you're on the winning side?! Do you know what our Lord is going to *do* to them tomorrow?!" Laughed one of them.

"How does he know they're coming tomorrow?!" Growled Pansy.

"You'd be surprised the things people talk about when they think songbirds are just that." Said another, jabbing Pansy in the chest with his wand. "They're going to die. They're all going to die. And there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

"And how do you plan to leave the school?" Asked Blaise, smirking despite a wand being aimed at the middle of his head. "Do you think attacking us will go unpunished?"

"Who's going to stop us? Malfoy? He's off snogging that Gryffindor bitch." Snorted the leader of the group, the smaller of the two from before.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"He's a traitor to Slytherin *and* to the Dark Lord! And where has it gotten him, huh?" Asked the larger of the two from before. "Stuck as Potter's lapdog! He's a disgrace to his family!"

"Better a disgrace to my family and a survivor than a trench-crawling maggot who's going to die tonight." Malfoy stated, stepping out of his hiding place, wand drawn and aimed. "Tell me something, Markov - do you believe yourself capable of beating me in a fair fight?"

"A fair fight? No. Good thing this isn't a fair fight, huh?" Replied the smaller of the two, Cameron Markov. "Do *you* believe yourself capable of beating all of us?"

Malfoy's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "*Beat* you? Markov, if your little group of boot kissing lackeys doesn't surrender right now, I'm going to *kill* you. Does that get through your thick skull? Will I have to

prove that I mean business? Dumbledore may sympathize with you people and offer second chances. I don't. It's a shame you haven't learned the difference, boys. It might have spared your lives. I've grown sick of monitoring the lot of you like toddlers at a daycare. This school's going to have its living waste flushed from it before the year ends. What better place to start than down here?"

Markov shoved the sixth year girl next to him out of the way and charged towards Malfoy, his wand pulling over one shoulder quickly. Malfoy smirked and simply stood his ground. When Markov brought his arm back down, screaming a curse towards Malfoy, the blonde brought his wand up and hissed something softly. The violet burst of light that had erupted from Markov's wand arched and went around Malfoy. It struck the wall behind and to his left, causing a small explosion.

"Your aim is terrible, Markov. Losing your cool is the first step to losing the fight. Did no one ever teach you that?" Asked Malfoy, grinning as Markov tried to not topple over forward. And before the boy could recover, Malfoy marched towards him, lowering his wand down. "I'm no one's lapdog, Markov. But I have picked up a few interesting tricks from him."

Wand jerking straight up suddenly, Malfoy roared, "*SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

The force behind the spell was incredible. It collided with the front of Markov's body, carving a deep groove through the seventh year's skin and sending him flying up into the air. Before he reached the top of his arc, Malfoy had brought his arm back and, after growling, "No one calls my girlfriend a bitch," took aim again and yelled, "*CRUCIO!*"

Markov's howling screams from the first spell seemed to amplify tenfold as the second connected. As he smashed back into the floor, writhing in pain and bleeding all over the place, Malfoy looked at the rest of the Death Eaters' children. "Would anyone else like to experience this? Or will you give up quietly?"

As one, the group aimed their wands at Malfoy.

Smiling darkly, Malfoy extended his arms to the sides, as though inviting the group to attack him. "By all means, then - give me a reason to kill you."

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Severus Snape was not in a good mood. This in and of itself was nothing out of the ordinary - he was in a bad mood quite often. In fact, the moments he spent being irritated far outweighed those of any other emotion. But his bad mood tonight stemmed from one thing - the impending assault on Azkaban. He wasn't going, of course. He needed to stay behind and help defend the school if it came down to that. Dumbledore had already explained to the staff what they were to do the day the attack would be held. No classes were going to be in session that day, as no one would be able to concentrate.

To think the whole war depended on that reckless twit Potter getting a gemstone out of hell itself, however... that was enough to turn the man's stomach. Not only were the odds hilariously against their side's favor, but Potter was also horribly bad at getting through a fight in any kind of healthy condition. Snape had spent the last hour in the infirmary, speaking with Madam Pomfrey about the types of potions and spells they would need to use the following day should things go awry.

At the moment, Snape was going to the Slytherin common room. One last check on his students and he would retire to his quarters, where most of the night would be spent feverishly making the potions that Pomfrey had requested.

As he stepped through the hidden passage in, he was struck by how incredibly quiet it was. But he hadn't expected the sight he was met with. Draco Malfoy, sitting on the couch, was comforting a few younger students. Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini were nearby, doing similar. And behind the couch...

Behind the couch was a small pile of what were obviously dead bodies. Glancing down at the floor, he saw blood trickling in-between the stones. Stepping into the room properly, he asked in a quiet voice, "Draco, would you care to explain what's happened here?"

Looking up in surprise, Malfoy then looked back at the two first years next to him, who were finally starting to calm down and stop crying. Sighing, he finally replied, "Markov and the other Death Eaters in training had tied up this lot and had Blaise and Pansy pinned to the wall. I'd just come back from... trying to clear my head... and walked in on it. I gave them all ample time to surrender. Markov charged me, I retaliated. Then the rest decided to gang up on me."

"Idiots forgot to take our wands away first." Blaise commented.

"...I see." Snape said. "And they are all dead, I presume?"

"Thoroughly." Malfoy stated, a cold gleam in his slate grey eyes. "I'm sure you'd agree that it was getting tiresome to dance around their actions. I merely cleansed Slytherin of the taint it was poisoned with. In addition to the Dark Mark being branded on all of them, I'm fully willing to submit a memory of the event should the Ministry wish to see a replay."

"As are Blaise and I." Said Pansy, holding a sniffling second year girl. "These kids were tied up prior to Draco getting back. Unfortunately, that meant that they witnessed almost all of what happened. I have a feeling no one's going to get any sleep tonight."

Snape sighed, bringing a hand up to massage his temples. "Well, I cannot simply go parading through the school, levitating a chain of corpses behind me as I make my way back to Albus. You'll have to endure while I go and fetch him."

"Sorry, Severus." Malfoy said, smirking faintly. "I know you're probably going to have a long night. But what else could I do? Incapacitate them? You and I both know that would get us nowhere. Dumbledore's too soft on them. He'd let them go with a warning. Or, at most, he'd expel them. And then what would happen? They'd wind up fighting us down the road. I may not be all-powerful like Potter seems to be at times, but that doesn't mean I'm going to sit back and do nothing. I made my decision. I chose my side. And it's time to start doing something with that. This was the first step. Helping Potter purge the filth from Azkaban while getting that gemstone back will be the next."



"You realize this will be impossible to cover up." Snape said.

"Well aware of that." Malfoy replied. "As I said, though - they all had the Mark and the three of us are willing to submit our memories. Hell, I'll take Veritaserum if the Ministry wishes. I've nothing to hide or regret. I defended myself, my friends, and the innocent from a group of Death Eaters."

"So you have." Snape said, sighing again. Scanning the crowd of younger Slytherins, he asked, "How are all of them?"

"Traumatized." Blaise stated. "We're all sleeping out here tonight. The three of us are going to watch over them. Keep the nightmares at a minimum and whatnot."

"Very well. Let me go and fetch Albus. And, once we have decided on what to do with the bodies, I'll come back and join you."

"What? But you've got work to do tonight, don't you?" Malfoy argued.

"Yes. Be that as it may, my students have just witnessed something that no one their age should ever have to. I *will* sit and talk with them until they feel they can sleep without worry. If more help is required tomorrow, we can contact St. Mungo's." Snape stated, giving Malfoy a pointed look before turning and heading back out. "I won't be long."

Malfoy watched him leave, his eyebrows raised high. It took a moment, but he noticed something after the Potions Master had departed - no one was crying anymore. Frowning, he glanced at the younger students and asked, "Are you lot okay?"

"I've never seen him act so nice..." Said one of the girls.

"Yeah... that was weird." Said one of the boys next to Malfoy.

Closing his eyes, Malfoy smirked. "Yeah. He'll do that sometimes. You think you know him, but then he turns around and acts completely different. He's terrible at covering that up, you know. He might keep a gruff voice, but he's one of the strongest our side has. It's a shame he isn't going with us tomorrow."

"Aren't you scared, Draco?" Asked another of the girls. "Of going to Azkaban?"

"I'd be a fool not to be." Malfoy said, looking toward the girl.

"But why go, then?" She asked.

Malfoy paused for a long time before looking back up and replying, "Because he wants me to."

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Harry was feeling listless. No surprise, he had been sitting on the couch for hours now. Tonks had finally gotten up to soak in the bath for awhile, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts. There was something bugging him, something that wouldn't leave his mind. It was something he hadn't wanted to voice while Tonks was around.

"Star? You awake?" He asked, quietly.

"I am." Came the beholder's voice.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Harry."

As the beholder floated out of his room, Harry looked over his shoulder. "How fast do you think you can disintegrate the material of this school?"

Stargazer paused, frowning. "How fast? ...I'm certain I could tunnel as quickly as you could walk, if not faster."

"Okay. Next question, then - could you tunnel that fast while carving out a hole big enough for me to follow you?"

"Of course." Said Stargazer, floating down next to Harry. "Why do you ask?"

"Because if something goes wrong tomorrow... and Voldemort's forces lay siege to Hogwarts in retaliation, the students are going to need a way out. I wrote to the Weasley twins earlier today. They're

Ginny's older brothers. I think I've shown you a photo of them before. Anyway, I told them I wanted them to come to the school tomorrow. They know the way in here. I gave them strict instructions that if the school *did* get attacked, they were to lead everyone they could in here. I want you to tunnel them out to safety. You'd have to ask them what direction to go in, though. I'm terrible with directions. Do you think you'd be up to it, though?" Harry explained.

"...I think I could, yes. It would be difficult if any attacks came from behind, though. Just because I can carve through things with my powers doesn't mean the resulting tunnel will be stable, you understand." Stargazer said.

"I know. But if everything was stable, would you be able to lead them out?" Asked Harry.

"I would do everything in my power to." Said the beholder.

"That's all I wanted to know. Thank you, Star." Harry said, letting his head thump back against the couch. "Oh... one more question."

"What is it?"

"Are you able to keep in contact with the rest of your kind?" Asked Harry.

"In a way." Said Stargazer. "All of us who are to come through to this world are implanted with a device that allows communication. But we have to be contacted. We cannot DO the contacting."

"Damn." Harry muttered. "Was hoping that you might be able to summon up more beholders to help the cause, should it come to it."

"Unfortunately, no. You would need to use the other scroll you were given. A difficult trick if you weren't here." Stargazer said.

"I figured as much. Alright, thanks, Star. You've lifted a load of worry off my brain." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"I will do everything in my power to protect the people of this school."

Promised

Stargazer.

"But I pray that it does not come to that."

"So do I, Star." Harry murmured. "So do I. Now I only have one thing to worry about..."

"That being?"

"Right now, my other half is resting. A good plan, given that we're probably going to exhaust ourselves tomorrow. I'm just worried. If things go tits-up out there, I don't know if I'll be able to keep the other me under control." Harry explained, opening his eyes and gazing into the crackling flames of the fireplace. "And if I can't..."

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## Chapter 22 – The Citadel of Azkaban

Almost everyone in the school had gathered in front of it to bid the Hogwarts team good luck. The Auror team was flying on brooms overhead, waiting for the other half to join them. It was a somber mood, despite the headmaster's best efforts to ease everyone's worries. Harry was late to the event, having made a few final preparations. He wanted the locket along with him for this. He needed Sirius' strength. He had to have something there to make him feel stronger and more confident. Walking outside, he passed through the crowd of people and met up with his friends.

They were all dressed in thick cloaks to ward against the cold air from the altitude they would be flying at. Malfoy was standing with his broom, gazing off towards the lake. Solieyu was saying goodbye to Luna. Tonks had stayed back in the Pit, saying she couldn't watch them leave; that it would be too hard.

Putting a hand on Luna's shoulder as he approached, Harry murmured, "Get the others and go keep Nym company after we leave?"

"Of course." Luna said, smiling at Harry.

"There you are!" Came a chipper voice from behind.

"We were wondering if you were ever going to show!" Came a second.

Harry smiled warily at the Weasley twins as he turned around to greet them. "Fred. George. Good to see you. I take it you're okay with everything in my letter?"

"We'll make sure everyone gets out." Fred said.

"Even if it costs us our lives." George added.

"I wish you two wouldn't talk like that." Ginny said as she and Hermione approached. "How long have you two been here?"

"About ten minutes." George said, ruffling his little sister's hair and causing her to squeak in irritation.

"Stoppit!" Ginny cried, swatting at George's hand.

"Draco. Where's Pansy?" Harry asked.

"Acting much like your girlfriend. She didn't want to see us off." Malfoy said, a dead tone to his voice.

"You alright?"

"Never better."

Harry frowned, glancing over his shoulder. "...Right. Never better." Sighing, he turned and walked towards Dumbledore, who was giving last-minute instructions to the staff.

"...if we do not make it, you will know. I want lookouts monitoring the skies and more keeping watch on the ground. All directions. There is no telling where an attack might come from. Fred and George Weasley are here because Harry has asked them to help. They will know where to lead the students. They can get them out safely." Dumbledore said, quickly.

"And what of us?" Asked Flitwick.

"We will stay and buy them time." McGonagall answered.

"And what of the seventh years who are of age? We cannot make them leave if they wish to stand and fight." Said Sprout.

"We will deal with that if it happens." McGonagall said. "If they wish to help, they are welcome to. They know the danger involved. As long as it gives the younger students a chance to get to safety..."

"Minerva is correct. The older students who wish to help may be allowed. Everyone knows what is happening here. But the safety of the younger students is top priority. They must be taken to safety." Dumbledore said.

"And where might they be going? If the front of the school is attacked, there are few escape options." Flitwick asked.

"My quarters." Harry said, coming to a halt near the group. "Fred and George know the location. Stargazer will create an escape route. The twins will keep to the rear of the group to ensure no one attacks from behind."

"Stargazer?" Asked Snape. "And who, exactly, is that?"

"That is the name of the beholder currently guarding Harry's rooms." Dumbledore responded.

"I see..." Said McGonagall, looking highly annoyed. "I still do not like the prospect of such a creature living in the school. But if it can get the students to safety..."

"It can." Harry said. Looking at Dumbledore, he asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes. We may leave at any time." Dumbledore said.

"Then let's get going. I want to be home by sundown." Harry said, turning and walking back towards his friends.

"He's quite confident." Sprout said.

"No. He's worried." Snape corrected. "He's just good at hiding it. He's putting on a brave facade to hide his insecurities."

"Severus is right." Dumbledore said. "Justifiable, given the circumstances, I'm sure you would all agree. Well then, everyone - the time has come for us to depart."

"Good luck, Albus." Said Flitwick. "We'll be waiting for your return."

"I will call for Fawkes to alert you when we are on our way." Dumbledore said, smiling down at the little professor. Turning, Dumbledore walked towards Harry's group. "Are the three of you ready?"

"As we'll ever be." Solieyu said, his broom propped over his right shoulder.

"Then let us go. As Harry has said, it would be nice to return by sundown. Personally, I am hoping for earlier than that. A prolonged battle does not favor our side." Dumbledore said.

"Be careful, Solieyu." Luna whispered, kissing the vampire.

"I will." Solieyu said, pulling the girl into a tight embrace. "Try not to worry too much, alright?"

"I'll try." Luna said.

Solieyu took a few steps away from the girl, hopped on his broom, and kicked off to join the Aurors in the sky. Harry gave his friends a quick wave before joining the others in the air. But before Malfoy could do the same, a quiet voice stopped him.

"I'm sorry. About what I said last night, I mean."

Closing his eyes, Malfoy turned around. Hermione had stepped forward and was looking up at him through her eyelashes.

"No, you were right. I was trying too hard to be confident about this." Malfoy replied, shaking his head slowly. "I'm sorry I lost my temper."

"Just... come back alive, alright?" Hermione said.

"I won't die even if they kill me." Malfoy said, smirking faintly. "...No one's going to die out there. Potter's not going to bear the burden of keeping everyone alive on his own. I'll be doing all I can to help him. The Dark Lord will regret ever making an enemy of me. I can only hope my father's there today..."

Hermione ran towards the blonde, throwing her arms around him and catching him off-guard. He stood still for a moment before sighing and leaning his head down to whisper, "Stop it. I'm going to be fine."

"You don't know that." Hermione said, her voice very quiet.



"Yes I do. Potter himself's said it, hasn't he? Behind him, I'm the strongest student at this school. We'll all get out of there okay. So stop crying. Believe in me, alright?" Malfoy said.

Hermione nodded a little, letting go of Malfoy and taking a step back to wipe at her eyes. "I'll see you later, then."

Smirking, Malfoy winked at the girl before hopping on his broom and kicking off into the air. Hermione hugged herself as she watched him join the others. A hand fell on her shoulder and she turned to see Ginny standing there.

"Come on. Let's go drag Pansy into the Pit. Then all of us can have a good cry." She said.

Hermione laughed, despite her mood. "I'll be fine once I get it out of my system..."

"At least you two don't have to try and sneak around anymore." Commented Luna, who looked delighted about their public show of affection.

Dumbledore, who had been watching events unfold, simply glanced at his own broom and gave a chuckle. "It's been a long time since I was on a long flight. I hope my legs don't fall asleep."

And that was that. Dumbledore joined the others in the air and the group quickly ascended high into the clouds. The crowd below watched them until they disappeared completely. Only then did they start to disperse. McGonagall called out to the students, telling them that if they wanted, they could all wait in the Great Hall. Classes were cancelled for the day and going outside was off limits until Dumbledore and company returned.

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"It was Hermione?! Damn it, I need to stop making bets with people. I *suck* at it!" Harry whined as the group started towards the Citadel.

"I thank you in advance for the ten galleons, sir." Solieyu said, grinning at Harry.

"Who the hell did Potter *think* I was seeing?" Malfoy asked, brow creased.

"I thought you were going out with Ginny! I've overheard Ron complaining that she's been sneaking out at night!" Harry cried.

"No, she has a different boyfriend. I think it's that Dean Thomas person. Don't you two know him?" Malfoy asked.

"Dean? Really? Good lord, I really AM bad at this." Harry said, sighing. "How the hell long have you been seeing Hermione?! ...And why did you feel the need to hide it?"

"As for how long... about four months after you convinced me to join your side of this war. It started off as a drawn-out argument and somehow ended with us kissing. I still don't know what the devil happened. As for hiding it... partly, it was to keep her safe. The Death Eater children knew everything anyway, though. I disposed of them last night." Malfoy said.

"What? What happened?" Harry asked.

As Malfoy explained the fight in the common room the night before, Dumbledore looked aside at Kingsley Shacklebolt and asked, "How long do you predict the flight to take? And have the scouts seen anything?"

"About two hours if we keep at speed." Kingsley replied. "And if they've seen anything, they haven't SAID anything. I'm hoping no news is good news, but I'm expecting the worst. There's no reason for them to not keep in contact, even if nothing's happening."

"So we should expect an aerial fight?" Asked Dumbledore.

"It'd be wise to." Kingsley said. "If more of those flying Dementors meet us mid-air, we're going to be in trouble."

"WHAT?!" Came Harry's yell. "In front of all those kids?!"

"What did you want me to do, Potter?! *STUN* them?!" Malfoy yelled back.

"He did what he had to." Dumbledore said, moving from near Kingsley down towards the younger trio. "I don't support his actions, but I commend him for keeping everyone safe."

"One more worry out of our hair, I guess." Harry sighed. "At the very least, it's good to know that you can drop a whole group of attackers."

"I had help." Malfoy reminded him.

"Still. I'm glad I have you two with me. I must admit, I'm not as confident as I'd like to be." Harry said.

"Didn't you say something stupid to me once? About not believing in yourself?" Malfoy asked, smirking.

"Oh, put a sock in it, Draco." Harry scowled.

Malfoy laughed. "Yes, it doesn't seem as noble when it's said back to you, does it?"

Ignoring the blonde, Harry asked, "How long's the trip? Anywhere near what I estimated?"

"Shorter by roughly an hour." Dumbledore said. "You'd all do well to expend as little energy as possible until then."

"I think he's telling both of you to shut up." Solieyu commented, earning a glare from both Harry and Malfoy.

But they decided the headmaster was right. Bickering would only burn through more energy. And it was energy they'd assuredly need for the upcoming battle. Taking a deep breath, Harry leaned forward on his Firebolt and concentrated on the sky ahead of him. This was going to be a long trip.

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Despite having been inside it in his visions and tracking it in a similar manner, nothing could quite prepare Harry for seeing the floating island in person. The smell of decay emanated from it and it looked absolutely abandoned. Were it not floating stock-still in the air over

the ocean, it might not look too out of place. Ramparts roughly encircled the courtyard, with broken-looking towers breaking the formation every so often. At the center of the courtyard stood the spiraling main tower itself. Everything that stood had been twisted from the black metal of the original prison, giving the Citadel an eerie gleam.

The two teams broke apart, planning to come at it from opposite sides. In addition, half of the Aurors' team would descend to monitor the underside of the island, just in case there were any Domini hiding there. More worrying than the prospect of Domini, however, was the fact that five broken bodies were laying all over the courtyard.

"The scouts?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Replied Dumbledore.

"Wonder what happened." Malfoy said, squinting to try and get a better view of the corpses.

"There's no telling. But it means it isn't safe to be in the air." Dumbledore said. "Let us meet up with Kingsley. We will decide what to do from there."

A few minutes later and the groups had converged again. The Aurors had carefully scanned the underside of the island and found nothing out of the ordinary. There were no Death Eaters on any of the towers and no sounds were coming from anywhere. The silence was the worst thing to Harry, who knew it was all a trap. He just didn't know what form said trap would take.

"What do you think got them, Albus?" Asked Kingsley. "They don't looked harmed in any way. It doesn't seem like the kind of thing that the Dementors would do."

"Indeed, which leads me to believe we may encounter something we were not expecting. I want all of you to be on alert. The plan remains the same. Our team will drop down and split. Harry will lead us through the spire and to the Soul. Your team is to monitor the island from the air. If anything happens, I am counting on you to give us warning fire." Dumbledore said.

"Understood. Potter, I want you to move as fast as you can. I've been told you know the layout pretty well. I hope that's true. The faster we can do this, the more in our favor it'll be. We aren't equipped for a prolonged battle." Kingsley said, glancing Harry's way.

"Yeah. If the magical currents weren't completely dead here, I would have already gotten the Soul out." Harry said. "Tom wanted us to come here. I just don't know why."

"Then let us get going. Is everyone ready?" Dumbledore asked.

"As ready as we'll ever be." Solieyu said. "Something's very wrong about this place. I can't quite put my finger on it, but... something's not right."

"Nothing's right about this place, Reinhardt." Malfoy said, looking down at the seemingly empty Citadel.

"Good luck." Kingsley said as the two groups split once again. The Aurors once more split up to monitor both the upper and lower halves of the flying island. Harry's group did a slow circuit around the courtyard before finally deciding that the best spot to land would be as close to the doors of the central tower as possible. As they descended, Harry felt something in his stomach drop out. They were being watched. He had been scanning all the windows he could, but he hadn't seen anything looking back out at him. And unless they had figured out a way to make the Dementors turn invisible or had every Death Eater outfitted with an invisibility cloak, Harry was mystified as to *why* he had this feeling.

As the first two men touched down, the reality behind the strange feeling manifested. All throughout the courtyard, the ground was littered with holes of varying sizes. They looked like where spells had hit. Harry had assumed them to simply be where either the scouts had fired during their attack or where the Death Eaters practiced their own dark magic.

But neither was correct. Instead, they were effectively arrow slits, used by those in hiding. For once the two men landed, the ground under them split and dark, skeletal hands belonging to countless

Altered gripped them by the ankles. Their screams were barely heard before they were dragged under.

Kingsley's half of the Auror team witnessed the event unfold below. Though not knowing how many regular Dementors, if there were any at all, were in the hole, he couldn't just sit back and not do anything. He barked an order to his squad and, as one, the six men fired Patronuses down and into the darkness. The sounds of pained hissing came from somewhere, but the effects of the spell weren't obvious.

"Everyone stay in the air!" Harry commanded, invoking the Patronus Armor and flying back down. "I'm going to clear a path!"

Landing, Harry paused only a moment to ensure that the ground under his feet wasn't going to give way. He then ran forward, held his hands out towards the hole, and sent a bright pillar of light shooting down into it. This had a drastically different effect than the Patronuses fired by the Aurors overhead. Savage screams from the Altered echoed for a moment before being silenced.

A few minutes passed, with barely anyone moving. Harry was patrolling the front half of the courtyard, sending blasts of light down into all the holes he could find. After awhile, he dropped the Armor and motioned for the others to land. When they did, Harry ran up to one of the Aurors.

"Things are already going badly. I want you to ask Kingsley if the team monitoring the underside of the island can come join the half of you who're going to stay out here while I go for the Soul. It may be silent right now, but I want someone watching that damn hole." Harry said, glancing over his shoulder.

The Auror nodded and flew up to meet with Kingsley. The two talked quickly before the man flew off, dipping below where Harry could see him. A minute later and seven men came flying back down into the courtyard. Harry quickly briefed them about what happened and said that due to losing two already, he would truncate his infiltration team to make up the difference. This was, of course, met with arguments from nearly everyone. But Harry held his ground, saying that if an

attack was going to occur again, the chances were far better that it was going to happen outside and not en route to the Soul.

Reluctantly, the Aurors agreed and began moving around the area. Some watched the sides, looking towards the back half of the courtyard. Some hid themselves behind the various sizes of debris littering the area. And a few decided to set up shop directly in front of the central tower just to monitor the hole the Dementors had made.

"Don't leave your posts for anything." Harry said as he, Dumbledore, Malfoy, and Solieyu were preparing to enter the tower. "Whatever happens, we'll take care of it. Keep your eyes and ears open, watch the towers on the outer walls, keep an eye on the holes in the ground, and if more Altered pour out, throw up that shield spell and try to wait it out. I promise I won't be long."

"Are you sure you're fine going in alone?" Asked one man. "It seems that it'd be better for all of us to rush the place."

"If something happened out in the courtyard, we'd be in trouble." Harry said, shaking his head. "I need someone out here keeping the escape route guarded. This shouldn't take more than ten, fifteen minutes at best."

"Good luck in there. We're all counting on you." Said another Auror.

"And best of luck out here. I can only hope we draw more attention than you guys." Harry said, offering the man a faint smile. Turning, he looked at the three people joining him. "Are you lot ready to go?"

"Whenever you are." Malfoy said.

"I still feel weird, Harry." Solieyu said. "There's something out *here* and there's definitely something in this damned tower. Whatever it is, it's got me nervous."

"I am sure more than one ambush is yet to greet us." Dumbledore said. "While we must be quick, we need not be hasty. When we approach corners, we will take the time to make sure nothing is waiting for us just around the bend."

"Then let's go." Harry said, drawing his wands.

Pushing open one of the two monstrously large doors, Harry and his group disappeared into the blackness of the tower. The few Aurors out front who were watching them leave glanced at one another for a moment before settling in. They wouldn't be waiting long for something to break the uneasy silence.

The door closing behind them, Dumbledore lit his wand up and began to lead the group through the empty corridors, going by directions Harry gave. Finally, he was here, walking through the metallic, black hallways he had seen so often in his visions. They didn't convey the same unholy aura the place gave off, though. And in the inky darkness, broken only by wandlight, Harry began to feel paranoid. Though something had certainly been watching them as they had descended into the courtyard, Harry was still feeling as though he and his friends were being watched. And in the narrow passageways of the Citadel's main tower, it was an unnerving feeling indeed.

A few floors up, a sudden explosion from outside caught the four inside off guard. Windows now broke the darkness, though their number was few and far between. Rushing over to one, Harry swore. Down in the courtyard, they saw that one of the towers along the wall had a hole blown in it. Death Eaters were pouring from it and attacking the Auror members. The overhead team was firing shots down at them and dodging shots being fired back.

"Damn it." Malfoy muttered. "We've got to speed this up. To hell with sneaking around. We've hit nothing so far! Our guys are outnumbered. We have to get that gem and get out!"

"Malfoy's right." Solieyu said. "As good as they are, they're going to be flooded soon. How far do we have?"

"About three more floors. Then it's in a room just off the main passage." Harry said. "What do you think, Professor?"

"I believe we can talk and move at the same time." Dumbledore said, turning and walking swiftly up the hall. "So let us make more effort to do so."



With the sounds of combat echoing below them, Harry quickly called out directions to go in every so often. The feeling of being watched still hadn't left, despite the Death Eaters now having made their appearance. So what did that mean?

*'It means we're going to hit a roadblock soon.'* Came the voice in Harry's head.

*'How do you know?'* He replied.

*'Can't you feel it? Look at Leon.'*

Harry's eyes slid to one side. Solieyu did indeed look off. His eyes were glowing faintly in the low light and he was breathing through his mouth. His fangs were just visible, gleaming against the light they would occasionally pass by. Something was worrying him enough to keep just on the edge of breaking his full power out. Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know what that meant, either.

"Leon?" He hissed quickly. "What's wrong?"

"Vampires." Solieyu growled, eyes narrowing as they got closer to the door at the end of the current hall they were in. "There are vampires here. They're through that door ahead of us."

"Are you sure?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Positive." Solieyu said, clutching his wand so tightly that his knuckles were white. "I know my own kind. I was worried that's what it might have been. But..."

"You didn't want to worry us if it wasn't." Malfoy finished.

Solieyu nodded.

"Well, that's the way we have to go." Harry said. "There's no alternate route. Looks like our own trip is about to get harder."

But Harry had no idea just how hard it would be. As they got to the door, Harry asked Solieyu if he could tell the number inside. Unfortunately, he couldn't, though he said that if it was over more

than their own number, they would have to try retreating. Vampires could be devilishly hard to kill unless you knew how. Dumbledore and Harry both tried easing his worries, saying that they knew the best way to kill vampires. Solieyu chuckled at this and asked if they had a contingency plan made up for if the Craving had ever taken control of him.

"I would be the first person to stop you if you ever got out of control." Harry told him. "I know the best way to try incapacitating vampires, but I also know it's a rarity to *keep* them that way. If it came to it, Leon, and I had no choice..."

"I appreciate it, Harry." Solieyu said. "I'd rather be killed than to take innocent lives when I wasn't in full control over my actions."

"Is everyone ready for what might be a long battle?" Asked Dumbledore, quietly.

Receiving confirmation from all three students, he pushed the door open and the group quickly filed in. They had been expecting vampires, perhaps ready to fire at them the moment they entered. And while vampires were inside, their number was only three and they were all sitting on the floor, looking immensely bored. A female in the center with two males flanking her, the three looked up upon hearing noise.

"That's good. Four on three sounds like nice odds." Malfoy chuckled.

"Yeah. Doesn't seem as bad as-- Leon? Hey, what's wrong?" Harry asked, looking at his friend.

Solieyu was standing deathly still, a look of absolute terror in his eyes.

"Leon?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Solieyu asked, his voice barely audible over the din from the escalating battle outside.

"Ah. You must be the one he told me about." Said the female vampire, getting to her feet. She had long, dark red hair and appeared to be in her early forties. She was dressed in elegant, crimson robes which

had a strange symbol on their front. "It's been a while, hasn't it? If he hadn't told me what to look for, I would have never guessed."

"Who is she?" Harry asked, brow creased as he glanced between Solieyu and the female vampire.

The woman laughed - an awful noise in and of itself - and tilted her head in amusement. "Has he not told you about me? Surely he has."

"I'll kill you..." Solieyu said, wand raising almost on its own. "Do you have any idea how much I've dreamed of this day?! Of finally getting to *KILL* you?!"

One of the woman's companions let out a barking laugh. "You? Kill her? Yeah, that's a laugh, kid. I'd love seeing you try."

"Only reason we're here is because the boss warned us that you idiots might pull some random shit out of your asses and surprise us with it." Said the other.

The two men finally stood up, stretching and popping various parts of their bodies. The woman watched them, still looking amused, before turning back to Solieyu. "How have you been, my dear little boy?"

"Leon!" Harry yelled, grabbing his friend by the shoulder. "Who *is* she?"

"The woman who turned me." Solieyu growled, his eyes glowing yellow. "Alexis Palinsky."

"Palinsky..." Harry repeated, looking over at the woman. "Why the hell would she be here?"

"He wanted us to be." Palinsky replied, crossing her arms. "Said it would do 'the boy' good to have a reunion with me. And, as these two said, they are here just in case. I'm fully capable of killing the lot of you, understand."

"Not bloody likely." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "Leon, do you--"

"Go on ahead, Harry." Solieyu said, hissing quietly as his fangs protruded all the way.

"What?"

"Solieyu..." Dumbledore said, warningly.

"The bitch is mine to kill." Solieyu growled, his voice dropping in tone. "Staying here and fighting with me is only going to delay our escape. I'll keep her busy. You go on ahead and get the Soul!"

"I'm *not* leaving you here." Harry stated.

"Oh yes you are." Solieyu said, turning to glare at Harry. "Because I'm not going to have you see what I plan to do to that woman. Because I've waited my entire life for this exact moment!"

"I'll stay with him." Malfoy said. "I have no qualms about seeing his violence. I'll make sure he stays safe."

"No you won't." Solieyu said, whirling around to look at the blonde. "You're going with them!"

"You forget one thing, vampire." Malfoy said, smirking at Solieyu. "I don't give a damn about your past or your revenge. But we have a job to do here. And I promised her that I was going to help Potter bear the burden of keeping everyone alive. I'm not leaving you here to fulfill some suicide mission you've given yourself. If you want me gone, you'll have to kill me."

"Damn you..." Solieyu growled. "...Fine. Stay. But Harry and Dumbledore are going ahead!"

"We are *NOT*--" Harry began. But Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "What? ...You can't be wanting to go along with his plan! Malfoy said it himself - this is suicide!"

"I have a feeling her friends will not assist her." Dumbledore said, his voice low. "I feel she wishes to fight him as badly as he wishes to fight her."

"Be that as it may, it'd be three on two. And these vampires are far more experienced than Leon is." Harry hissed quickly. "If we all stay..."

"Then we risk losing more down below." Dumbledore said, his voice grim. "Do you see now, Harry? How difficult it truly is to make decisions concerning peoples' lives? Sometimes, the best thing to do is to trust in your friends and to continue towards your goal. I do not believe I have ever seen him look so determined. And with Mr. Malfoy here, do you truly believe them incapable of holding their own?"

"That isn't what I'm saying." Harry argued. "But I can't leave them!"

"Potter, would you stop your bloody whining and *GET GOING*? The faster you get the gem and get back here, the better off things will be. If you keep stalling, our side is going to be in worse and worse shape. We all knew the consequences of coming with you. If the vampire is going to stay and fight, I'll stay and make sure the idiot doesn't get himself killed. Unless you think I'm not strong enough to do it."

"Draco, I never said that." Harry repeated. "But..."

"But you worry. I realize that. But there needs to come a time when you stop trying to carry the load by yourself. Let us help. Let us do this. Getting the Soul is the most important thing. What's the worst that could happen? Me becoming a vampire? Him going out of his mind? I know how to stop vampires just as well as you and the headmaster do. If it comes to it, I'll knock him out myself and finish the fight." Malfoy said. Seeing that Harry was going to try arguing, the blonde narrowed his eyes and continued, "Go, Harry."

Harry blinked. The two stood there, staring at one another for awhile before Harry finally nodded slowly. "Alright... Alright, Draco. Leon, you be careful. We'll be back as soon as possible."

"Feel free to take your time." Solieyu said, grinning maniacally.

"Good luck, Draco." Harry said.

"Luck isn't needed. We may require some towels by the time you get back, but luck?" Malfoy smirked. "You don't need luck when you have power."

"We gonna let those two just leave?" Asked one of Palinsky's companions.

"The boss said that it didn't matter how many got by." Said the other, yawning. "Long as Lex gets to play with the one she wants."

"Call me that again and I'll pierce your eyes with your own fangs." Hissed Palinsky, grabbing the man by the throat and dragging him in close. "Understand?"

"Y-yeah..." Said the man, looking nervous.

"We shall be back as quick as we can." Dumbledore called as he and Harry ran by the trio of vampires and pushed open the other door.

"We'll catch up." Malfoy called back. "I have a feeling this won't take long."

As Harry and Dumbledore disappeared into the next hall, Palinsky ordered her companions to go to one side of the room to stay out of her way. Grumbling, the two male vampires did as they were told. Malfoy leaned in and asked, "What do you want to do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Solieyu growled. "We kill her."

"One track mind, huh?"

"You have no idea."

Alexis Palinsky stretched before grinning sweetly at Solieyu. "You have my word that those two won't interfere with our battle. And just to be sporting, I'll let your little friend there assist you. I assure you, it won't make any difference. But I HAVE been waiting here an awful long time. I got quite bored. I'm going to enjoy playing with you."

With that, Palinsky took hold of her cloak's clasp and unhooked it. Dropping into a battle stance, she flung the cloak across the room and let out a quiet, low hiss.

"Show me what you've become."

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## Chapter 23 – Solieyu

Even as they ran, Harry could hear a roar of anger coming from Solieyu as the room they had left erupted into combat. He hated this. He hated that his team was being split apart bit by bit. He hated leaving his friends behind to deal with seemingly insurmountable odds. But they were right - the sooner he could get the Soul of Balthazar, the sooner he could return to assist them. He had no doubt in his friends' power, but he was worried that Solieyu's rage at seeing Palinsky would drive him to making bad decisions in the heat of battle.

"Try to focus, Harry." Dumbledore said as he picked his pace up once more. "They will be fine."

"I hope you're right." Harry murmured. "Turn right up ahead. More stairs. It's not far away now."

Eventually, the sounds of fighting grew fainter and fainter as they continued their climb. Even the sounds from the courtyard sounded quiet from up here. They were nearing the one room that Harry was most worried about. They were going to have to cross Voldemort's chambers to get to the hall that led to the Soul's room. As since the Dark Lord hadn't made an appearance yet, he knew he was waiting for them to arrive.

"You know he's going to be there, right?" Asked Harry.

"I have been expecting it, yes." Dumbledore replied.

"What do we do when we get there?"

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it."

Harry sighed. "Left up ahead. Then it's a straight walk to his quarters."

As they got closer, Harry's scar began to throb. Voldemort was definitely waiting for them. And, as they pushed open the door leading in, there he was. The Dark Lord stood in the middle of the room, as still as a statue, facing the door. When Harry and



Dumbledore had fully entered, the door closed behind them. Only then did Voldemort bow low to them before speaking.

"Welcome to my Citadel. I hope you've both been having a wonderful time so far." Purred the Dark Lord, a smile on his face. "It would seem there aren't as many with you as you started with. A shame. But I simply cannot allow you to roam freely, invading my home as you please."

"Planned to make this place our grave, huh?" Harry asked.

"Grave? No, Harry. Not your grave. This is serving as a lesson to you. What you take from it will depend on how things play out. And while I don't intend to kill you here today, I cannot vouch for the lives of your friends. Did Mr. Reinhardt enjoy his reunion with Miss Palinsky? I went to great lengths to get her here today. Russia *is* quite a ways away, you understand. She was holed up in a quaint little cottage when my Death Eaters finally tracked her down. I lost three in trying to convince her to join the cause. Well worth the effort, I would say."

"Shame Leon's going to kill her, then, isn't it?" Harry said, smirking.

Voldemort's eyebrows would have raised, had he had any. "Ah, Harry. Do you truly believe your friend capable of killing Alexis Palinsky? Do you not know of her power? ...No, I don't suppose you would. I admit, she is outside what one would consider the normal range of research. Why would someone in Britain have need to look up what a Russian vampire has done? A pity, that. Perhaps after you leave my Citadel, you will be driven to look it up. I assure you, it will be a lengthy read."

"I don't give a damn about Palinsky! Are you going to fight us or not?" Harry asked, wands aimed at the Dark Lord.

"Fight you? ...No, I don't believe I feel up to that right now. Albus, on the other hand, I think I could have a few rounds with, so to speak." Voldemort said, drawing his own wand and looking at Dumbledore. "What do you say, Albus? For old time's sake? I will allow Harry to proceed. There is nothing between this room and the syphon chamber. He will find the Soul of Balthazar there. Do not look so surprised, dear boy. Do you believe me ignorant to your plans?"

"Why allow him to take the gemstone, Tom?" Dumbledore asked, his wand at the ready.

"Quite simple - to prove a point. Even if he manages to survive the process required to bring the Gauntlet of the Magi to life, he will still not be able to equal my power. Surely you realize that." Voldemort said.

"I guess we will have to wait and see, won't we?" Dumbledore said, smiling grimly.

"Indeed we will." Voldemort responded. And then, in the blink of an eye, he had launched the first attack. Dumbledore was ready, however, and blocked it with a shield spell.

"Harry! Continue on and get the gem!" Dumbledore cried, pouring his power into the shield. "I will ensure Voldemort does not come after you!"

Harry nodded and bolted across the room. True to his word, Voldemort allowed Harry to pass, his focus being purely on Dumbledore. Now his party of six had been reduced to just him. For whatever reason, he believed the Dark Lord saying that there was nothing between him and the Soul. Sure enough, Harry managed to break into what Voldemort had called the 'syphon chamber' without any more problems.

A sense of powerful déjà vu washed over him as he walked toward the pedestal in the center of the room. It was a place he had seen countless times now. And, as he approached the gem sitting on it, a pale blue figure rose from it.

"You've arrived... he said you were coming today." Said the old man, his voice weak.

"Will you be okay once I take the gem off the pedestal?" Asked Harry, walking over. "There aren't any traps on it?"

"Nothing will happen." Confirmed the ghost. "And once I am free of its draining powers, I will slowly begin to recover. How many did you bring to this fight?"

"Twenty-four. We were down to twenty-two almost immediately after landing." Harry said.

"And now it is just you...?" Asked Balthazar.

"No. My friends are still fighting. But we need to be quick. The sooner we get back, the sooner I can help them!" Harry said, reaching out and removing the Soul from its prison. Almost at once, Balthazar's ghost let out a weary sigh of relief and vanished.

His voice came from the gem, however, which glowed faintly when he spoke. "Then let us get going, Harry. You have risked too much already to get to me. Let us not stay any longer than we have to."

Harry pocketed the gem and took off running at full speed back towards Voldemort's chambers. But neither he nor Dumbledore were there. The fight had spilled out into the hall leading up to the room. Harry rushed through the other door and found himself staring at Dumbledore's back. He was slowly pushing Voldemort back up the hall. The Dark Lord was blocking spell after spell, but each was shoving him back a little further.

"Harry! The stairs!" Dumbledore yelled as soon as he noticed Harry's presence. "I will keep him busy!"

Harry resumed running again without another word. If there was anyone he *wasn't* worried about, it was Dumbledore. Even staring down someone as powerful as Voldemort, he knew the headmaster would at least be able to hold his own, if not knock him out cold for awhile. And while he hoped for the latter, he wasn't counting on it.

He was more worried about Solieyu and Malfoy. As he got descended the tower, he couldn't hear any noise coming from the room he had left his friends in. He took aim and blasted open the doors as he ran. Skidding to a halt in the room, he saw that it too was empty. But unlike with Voldemort and Dumbledore, the fighting hadn't simply moved out into the nearby hall. In fact, Harry wasn't sure *where* they had gone. Hoping it was simply further down the tower, he swore and took off running again.

The sounds of combat from outside had intensified. Stopping only long enough for a quick glance, Harry saw why. The Death Eaters had somehow been stopped and were laying dead all around the courtyard. And while a few of the Aurors were motionless as well, it was evident that their side had won that part of the fight. But now, a slew of vampires was laying siege to the men, joined by small pockets of Dementors that had started crawling up through the now-unguarded hole that had been made by their brethren.

"Great." He muttered as he continued down. "More vampires. Balthazar, did Voldemort mention any of his plans around you?!"

"I am afraid not." Came the muffled voice of the ghost.

"Damn..."

*'Something isn't right.'* Came the voice in his head.

*'Shut up. I know something isn't right!'* Harry yelled back.

*'No... something's really not right.'* Said the voice. *'Can't you sense it?'*

*'Clearly not.'* Harry replied. *'Now shut up and let me concentrate, dammit. I don't have this place as memorized backwards as I did forwards.'*

The voice in his head grew quiet as Harry made his way out to the double doors leading outside. Taking a deep breath, he burst into the courtyard, took aim at the two nearest vampires, and roared, "**TELUM CONICIO!**"

A pair of long spikes flew from the tips of his wands, piercing the vampires' chests and sending them flying backwards. Harry rushed over to the Aurors he had assisted. "Are you two alright?! What the hell's going on?!"

"One of the Death Eaters fired off some signal!" One of the men shouted. "The vampires were hiding as bats! When they came down, the Dementors started to come UP! We've been doing all we could to keep alive. Where's Albus and your friends?"

"Dumbledore's fighting Voldemort. I dunno where Leon and Draco are! I was hoping someone out here had seen them..." Harry said.

"They haven't come outside yet." Said the other man. "Potter, do you think you could get rid of these Dementors for us? We can take the vampires, but we're being pinned down!"

"Right. *PATRONUS CONTEGO!*" He yelled, the flash of light flaring to life and encasing him in the Armor. As he shot forward towards a group of Aurors being trapped in their own shield to ward the Dementors off, a horrible laughter filled the air.

High above, Voldemort suddenly lowered his wand and grinned, jerking his head towards the nearest window. "You would do well to witness this, Albus." He hissed. "It will be the boy's downfall!"

Dumbledore frowned, keeping one eye on Voldemort and one on the battle below. For awhile, all he could see was Harry moving from one pack of Dementors to another. Once they had all been cleared out, he started taking potshots at the vampires, who would shapeshift to avoid being struck. And while he managed to bring down one or two, he was clearly too worked up to fight properly.

"What is going on?" Dumbledore asked quickly. "What do you want me to see, Tom?"

Voldemort leveled a triumphant smirk at Dumbledore as he replied, "I want you to see how foolish it was to think you could escape without casualties."

The sound of shattering glass filled the courtyard as a body came flying out of a third floor window. It crashed to the ground near Harry, making a series of sickening cracks on impact. Harry stared down at Malfoy as the blonde let out a howl of pain, curling up and clutching at his left leg, which was assuredly broken in several places.

"Draco!" Harry cried, rushing over and dropping to the ground. "Are you okay?!"

"No, I'm not okay!" Malfoy roared. "My leg..."

"Don't move. We'll get you out just as soon as Leon and Dumbledore get out of there." Harry said.

Malfoy's pained expression turned towards Harry then. And Harry saw something he thought he would never see - tears spilling from Draco Malfoy's eyes. The knot in Harry's stomach twisted sharply as he asked, "Draco? Where *is* Leon?"

"I'm sorry." He whispered, his voice breaking. "I'm so sorry. I tried as hard I could. I just wasn't good enough..."

"Draco! *WHERE* is Leon?!" Harry shouted, grabbing at the blonde's robes.

He wouldn't have to wait long to find out. The front doors on the Citadel crashed open then. Alexis Palinsky strode out, looking fine save for a deep cut on her cheek. She had a victorious smile on her face. Behind her, floating limp in the air, was Solieyu. The moment Palinsky saw Harry, her smile grew. And, with a sharp jerk of her arm, Solieyu's body flew across the courtyard, crashing into the ground and rolling over next to Harry and Malfoy.

"Leon?"

His arm had twisted at an odd angle underneath him as he rolled to face upwards. His eyes stared up into the sky, unblinking and lifeless. As Harry slowly crossed the short distance to his friend's body, he could vaguely hear Malfoy speaking behind him.

"I tried to take the Curse for him... he shoved me back out of the way, though..." Whispered Malfoy. "I... I don't... *Why?* Why the hell would he do that?! This was his fight..."

Harry put his hand up to Solieyu's throat. There was no pulse and his flesh felt deathly cold. His breathing started to grow shaky as he shook his friend lightly. "No. You can't die here... You told her you wouldn't..."

"It seems," Came Palinsky's voice, cutting the silence like a knife, "That your friend was all talk. He put on a good show, don't get me wrong. Killed the two idiots I was with without much effort at all. But

then the poor boy decided that if he was strong enough to kill them, he'd be strong enough for me. Tsk. How pitiful."

"I threw everything I could at her." Malfoy said, his voice growing weaker. The pain was starting to get to him. Before losing consciousness, he once more whispered an apology to Harry, who was now slumped over Solieyu's corpse.

"Now what, Harry Potter?" Cooed Palinsky. "Are you going to cry? Scream that it isn't fair? Speak of avenging your fallen comrade, perhaps?"

She laughed once more, the hideous noise causing Harry to shake harder.

"Do you see?" Laughed Voldemort. "Can you feel it, Albus?! Your little golden boy has been broken! Run to him, Albus. Run as fast as you can. See if you can prevent him from what he's about to do!"

And even as he finished his sentence, Dumbledore had rushed away. The headmaster had a bad feeling about what would happen if he didn't get back down to him in time. As he flew down the stairs, the overwhelming feeling of failure washed over him. He knew there was a slim chance that they would escape without casualties. But he hadn't counted on someone that close to Harry falling. He knew that no matter what was going through Harry's mind, it wasn't good.

But all that was going through Harry's mind were things that his friends had said over the course of the year. Things he should have listened to. Things he should have done but was too afraid to. Things he had to do but had refused.

And this was the result of failing to heed their advice.

*"I know you're tired." Malfoy said, his voice rigid. "But gain dominance again. You're slipping, Potter. Whatever he's telling you, I think you should ignore it and carve your OWN path to victory."*

Harry's eyes squeezed shut as tightly as they could. And, just like that, he found himself standing in the landscape of his magical core. The creature of light was standing mere feet in front of him.

*"Everyone has a breaking point." Solieyu continued, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. When Harry turned to look back at him, he went on. "When someone is pushed to the limits of his sanity, strange things can occur. For good, for evil, it all depends on how you wield it. But there lies an importance difference between you and Voldemort. You feel remorse for those you've killed. Despite knowing what kind of people they were and what would happen if they continued to live, you still regret having to end their lives. Why is that? It's because you're strong, Harry."*

Slowly, the creature raised its right hand up, extending it towards Harry.

*"Listen to me, Harry. There will come a time when you have to make a choice. In the heat of battle, when all you know seems to be falling apart around you, you will have to overcome your anger. You won't be able to lock it away or brush it aside. You will have to face it. You will have to acknowledge it and you will have to control it."*

"Do you see?" It said, its voice soft. "Do you see why I wanted to merge? Please... let me help you. We can kill her. We can slaughter everyone here. We can avenge Leon and every Auror that has fallen in battle. We won't let their deaths be in vain."

*"Maybe you just need a big enough push. Something to drive you over the edge again." Solieyu said, giving Harry's shoulder a squeeze. "Something to force the other you out and drive HIM to the point of madness again. If you ever sense something like that coming... don't try to fight it. Let it rise, but take control over it. Don't let it rampage mindlessly. If you can gain control in a situation like that, you'll probably merge again."*

Harry looked up at the creature, tears streaming down his face. Voice unsteady, he quietly asked, "Do you think it's worth the price?"

*"You will attack Azkaban and reclaim the Soul of Balthazar. You will find a way to create a new Philosopher's Stone. And you will survive the forging process. After that, it's only a matter of time. All the power you could ask for will be at your disposal. Just remember one thing."*



"I think that it's already been paid." Said the creature, eyes downcast.  
"All that's left is to clean up what remains."

*"You must remain in control. If left unbridled, power will corrupt you. If you do not force your dominance over it, it will consume you. So if you ever feel yourself losing control, remember that you're the only one who can stop Voldemort. Push down whatever anger is eating you and come out on top. Harness the power properly and no one will be able to touch you." Boris said.*

Slowly, Harry brought his own right hand up. And, as he took hold of the creature's, all he could do was whisper a bitter apology. The creature of light smiled sadly at him and, as its body began to break down, it whispered, "Never again."

As Dumbledore exited the central tower, some distance behind Alexis Palinsky, Harry was standing up again. Head slowly tilting back, Harry opened his eyes and gazed up at the sky.

"Aww... going to cry some more, Potter?" Asked Palinsky, stepping closer.

"No." Harry murmured, his quiet voice carrying through the sounds of fighting that still continued all around him. "I don't cry."

Palinsky snorted. "Then what *will* you do? Attack me as your dead little friend did?"

"No." Harry repeated. "I won't attack you. I'll kill you."

Blazing light engulfed the courtyard as Harry invoked the Patronus Armor once more. But this time, something was different. When the initial flash faded, it left Harry standing over Solieyu's body, covered in a pure white light. The only thing that broke the brilliance of the light were the two burning, red orbs that constituted eyes. Slowly, Harry turned and looked towards Palinsky, who had the decency to take a step back. Something unnerved her about this.

"Return to me!" She suddenly screamed. And, as one, the remaining vampires got between her and Harry.

But it didn't matter. Not anymore. It also didn't matter that the magical currents were dead. He *was* the light now. He could forge new currents just from his own magical output if he so desired. He could travel without even using them. Really, it was all a matter of what he thought was better. But neither concerned him at the moment. All he wanted was to slaughter the remaining vampires. And then...

Harry shifted, reappearing behind Palinsky and her group. And, before any of them could turn and fire at him, he let out an unholy roar as he screamed, "*IGNEUS REGNUM!*"

A sphere of red light surrounded the small group. Dumbledore had to quickly turn away from the sudden light, its brightness was so intense. But he didn't need to look at it to know what was going on inside it. The excruciating screams coming from within told him all he needed to know. Harry was killing them. And, given what he had seen, it was probably in the most tortuous way imaginable.

Suddenly, the screams stopped and the sphere vanished. At his feet was a small mound of dust and bone fragments. Dumbledore reached out to him, saying his name, but Harry ignored the man. Walking back across the courtyard, he knelt next to Solieyu's body and whispered an apology.

"I'm sorry, Leon. I wasn't strong enough. I should have listened to what everyone told me. I should have merged with him sooner. If I had... none of this would have happened." He said, eyes slipping shut. When they opened again, he resumed speaking, his voice growing loud enough for everyone to hear his voice. "I've been mentally arguing with myself for a long time now about something. I know how to create a Philosopher's Stone. The problem was the price. I wasn't sure if it was worth it."

Suddenly, the floating island jolted sharply, as though being struck by an earthquake. Tilting his head back, Harry murmured, "Nothing's going to leave this island alive. I'm going to rip the souls out of all of them. The Death Eaters are still fresh. The prisoners below, used as food for the Dementors. Voldemort himself. Every single evil thing on this island will be stolen and used to resurrect the Philosopher's Stone from the shard I've kept with me all these years."

"You can't do that, Harry." Dumbledore said, walking over quickly. "It isn't your decision to make."

Eyes flaring brightly, Harry whirled around and yelled at the headmaster. "Was it Leon's decision to be killed by the woman who turned him?! Was *that* fair?! Was it your sister's decision to lose control over her powers?! Was it *my* decision to become what I've become?! No! I've done this because it's what everyone's *expected* me to do! I've become a living weapon forged solely to stop Voldemort! Life is unfair, old man. Victory goes to those strong enough to take whatever means necessary to grasp it."

One of the Aurors suddenly let out a scream. Harry looked over in time to see a Dominus slam into him from above. Harry was at the man's side in an instance, knocking the Dementor away before it could cause serious injury to him. But doing this seemed to anger the remaining Dementors. Two more sets of wings unfolded from the crowd. The other two Domini joined their friend in front of Harry, whose eyes narrowed.

"Oh? Three of you? Is that it?" He asked.

When the first got back to its feet, it launched itself at Harry, smashing into him and sending him skidding back halfway across the area. When he stopped, the other two flew at him and collided as well. The first tried to bite down into Harry's neck, only to recoil quickly, letting out a shriek of pain.

"Is this supposed to worry me?" Harry asked, a dark smile splitting his face. "Thank you in advance. Though tainted beyond recognition, your souls will still count. As will those of your remaining brethren."

Mouth splitting clear back to his ears, a dark red mist filled the air. Throwing his head back, he let out one last scream.

"*SANCTUS DEFAECO!*"

In an instant, the entire island of Azkaban was encased in the giant sphere of light. From his position, Dumbledore could feel the darkness of everything on the island. It was a completely

indescribable feeling, yet one he recognized instantly. He felt something else, something he wasn't sure the origin of. What felt like tendrils of concentrated energy were lashing out and occasionally flying past him. Soon it became evident what they were for as the wails of the living filled the sphere. Dumbledore could sense the amount of darkness decreasing. Harry was going through with his plan - he was ripping the souls out of everything evil on the island.

And just as quickly as it had engulfed the island, it had dispersed. When he felt it was safe to open his eyes, Dumbledore looked towards where Harry was last standing. But he had moved. He was standing next to Solieyu, a large, jagged, red rock clutched tightly in his left hand. Armor dispelled, the headmaster was surprised to see the boy's hair and eye color were still what they should be.

Dropping to his knees, Harry brought the Philosopher's Stone up and pressed it to Solieyu's unmoving chest. "It wasn't worth the price. It wasn't worth this. I'm so sorry, Leon. I should have been able to prevent this. But rest assured... I'll make them suffer for this. Alexis Palinsky is dead. And don't worry, Leon... I'll make sure everything else goes off without a hitch. I'll make sure to take care of Luna."

Reaching out with a shaking hand, Harry closed his friend's eyes before slowly standing up again. The battle was over. They had gotten what they had come for and then some. But the death toll was too high. It shouldn't have ended this way. Bringing a hand up to cover his eyes, Harry asked, "Could you get Draco and Leon back to Hogwarts, Professor? I'm not feeling so good."

"Of course I will." Said Dumbledore, frowning.

Holding out his hand to one side, Harry's firebolt flew over to him. Wobbling for a moment, Harry gave Solieyu one last look before mounting the broom and kicking off into the air. And, without looking back, he shot off into the sky.

Dumbledore watched him leave, sighing softly, before turning and surveying the battlefield. In total, they had lost 16 good people. Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was limping quite badly, approached the headmaster.

"What now, Albus?" He asked.

"Collect the dead and follow me. We're leaving." Said Dumbledore, his quiet voice seeming to resound through the silent courtyard as he walked towards Solieyu and Malfoy. Bringing his wand out, he levitated the two into the air before summoning his own broom.

Before kicking off, Dumbledore's voice raised slightly as he called out, "Fawkes!"

With a melodic trill, the phoenix appeared in the air above the headmaster. Looking up, Dumbledore murmured, "Let them know we're returning. Let them know we didn't fair well."

With a nod, Fawkes flew straight up, exploding in a shower of flames as he transported himself back to Hogwarts. Watching the embers die, Dumbledore kicked off into the air.

It was going to be a long flight back.

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## Chapter 24 – Dangerous

Harry faltered as he flew back towards Hogwarts. He had done everything he had set out to do, that much was true. But it had taken a toll on his mind and body. But even as he flew, he felt his magical reserves recharging at an almost frightening rate. His mind, on the other hand, would take far longer to recover. But he couldn't stop now. Not after what had happened. This was just the start. Voldemort was living on borrowed time. When Harry confronted the Dark Lord next, he would do far worse than kill him.

Because now he knew. Everything he had denied the entire year and everything he had tried to avoid had come back to bite him. And even as he let his tears flow, out where no one would ever bear witness to it, he knew the truth. Solieyu's death had been the catalyst. He had merged with his other half and he had attained a Philosopher's Stone. The Gauntlet could be reforged at any given time. If his friend hadn't died, there was a good chance that they would all have perished on the island. If not from the vampires, then from the Domini. And if not the Domini, then from Voldemort.

Voldemort had escaped unharmed, of course. Harry hadn't been able to find him when he had dismantled the pathetic souls lingering within the damned place. Probably after Dumbledore had taken his leave. Another test. It had all been another test. Voldemort was so confident that Harry would be unable to beat him. But Voldemort lacked foresight. He wasn't thinking the way Harry was thinking. Not anymore. Now his desire to put an end to the war was back as it should have been from the start.

Wiping his eyes, Harry gripped the Firebolt tighter and leaned forward, pushing it to go as fast as it could. And even that wasn't enough. It wasn't fast enough. It would never be fast enough. Gritting his teeth, Harry invoked the pure Armor and shifted. The currents out here were fragile at best, but they would still get him back home faster than any other method.

Things would change now. Harry wouldn't return to Hogwarts. Not as a student. He was far more powerful than any student had a right to

be. He could do whatever he wanted after the war was over. Education mattered little anymore. Not in the midst of a war. Not for what he had in mind.

The school came into view. Everyone was waiting out front. Scanning the crowd, he saw that none of his friends were there. He hadn't expected them to be. But it did make things more difficult for him. He needed to tell the mediwitches and wizards out in front of the pack what to expect. They could prepare better that way. On the same note, the last thing he wanted to do was to answer questions. Swearing under his breath, Harry switched currents and appeared with a sharp *CRACK* in front of the group, startling almost everyone.

"Potter!" Cried McGonagall. "Where are the others?!"

Harry stood up straight, his red eyes boring into McGonagall's. After a moment, he replied, "On their way." Glancing towards the medical team, he added, "Draco's got a bevy of shattered bones, amongst other things. Knoxx is suffering from a severe spinal injury. Clancy and Elma are missing ears. Dumbledore, Kingsley, Johnston, and myself are the only other survivors."

"The only..." Flitwick repeated, slowly. "Oh no..."

Glancing back to McGonagall, Harry said, "We'll be waiting."

"Waiting? Potter, what--?" McGonagall began. But Harry had shifted again before she could finish her question.

Harry jumped from current to current, taking the fastest route down into the Pit. He came to a rough landing in the middle of the room, once more producing a loud *CRACK* upon shifting back in. He stood up slowly, glancing around the room. Everyone was on their feet instantly. But Harry didn't care. Dropping the Armor, Harry let his Firebolt clatter uncaringly to the ground. Ignoring the questions he was receiving from everyone at the same time, he stepped towards Luna, grabbed her, and pulled her into a fierce embrace.

Luna's body stiffened immediately, her eyes wide. "...Harry?"

"Gather around me. All of you." Harry whispered, narrowing his eyes. "We're going up to the hospital wing."

"Harry? What happened?" Luna asked, panic rising in her voice.

Harry stepped back, looking Luna in the eyes. He offered no reply. But he didn't need to. Luna could tell from his expression that Solieyu wasn't going to be coming back to her. Tears welled in her eyes as Harry's looked away. Everyone in the room had gone silent.

"I'm sorry." He whispered. "We did what we went there to do... we came away with more, even. But the price was too high. Sixteen are dead."

"Who killed him?" Luna asked, her voice almost inaudible.

"Alexis Palinsky." Harry said, meeting the girl's gaze again. A look of shock flashed across her features.

"The woman who...?" Tonks asked.

"Yes." Harry replied.

"What happened to her?" Luna asked, her voice shaking.

"I killed her. I encased her and every remaining vampire that ambushed our teams within what was effectively a giant ball of fire. I melted her slowly, making sure she lived until I got bored with her." Harry said, a deathly cold tone to his voice. "I burned every last one of them to powder. I rendered the Dementors extinct. All the Death Eaters are dead. All the prisoners are trapped within the new Philosopher's Stone. I killed everything that remained alive because of what she did."

Silence reigned in the Pit after that, save for the quiet sounds of Luna starting to sob. As others came over to comfort her, Harry reached out and took hold of Luna's hands. With everyone so close together, he could get this done in one trip. The Armor flared up again, rapidly encasing everyone in the Pit.



"They'll be taking the bodies to the hospital wing. Hermione, you should know that Draco is injured as well. He tried to take the Killing Curse for Leon. But Leon shoved him back out of the way. Palinsky threw him out of a window. He didn't land well." Harry said, red eyes shifting to look at Hermione, who recoiled slightly.

Harry shifted with the entire group and, after a moment for them to gather their bearings, moved them towards the hospital wing. Shifting back in, he dropped the Armor. As everyone turned to see if anyone had been brought in, Harry staggered. Not yet... it was too soon. He still had things to take care of. There was still too much to do.

When the doors did open, it was nearly five minutes later. Harry had sat everyone down and gave a quick run-through of what had transpired. When the bodies were led in, Harry found himself keeping an eye on Luna. When Solieyu was levitated in, she let out another great sob and wrapped her arms around her body. Getting to his feet, Harry walked over. Hogwarts' staff were transporting the dead in. The medical teams were working on the injured out front, he was told.

Flitwick was the one who brought Solieyu in, laying him gently in the bed nearest Harry's friends. It was evident that the little wizard was broken up about losing one of his own, as telltale trails down his cheeks belied the fact that he was trying to be strong in front of his students.

"Solieyu..." Luna breathed, moving next to the vampire and reaching over. Her head tilted to one side as she drew shaky breaths. But instead of crying even harder or getting hysterical like Harry had assumed she would, she simply smiled sadly and, wiping at her eyes, leaned over and placed a light kiss on Solieyu's forehead. "Rest well, Solieyu."

"Luna?" Harry said, walking over. "Are... you alright?"

"No." Said Luna, turning to smile at Harry. "But I'll survive."

"Who are you trying to be strong for?" Harry asked.

"We still have to tell his mother." Luna stated. "I won't cry anymore until she gets here." She paused for a moment before asking, "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

Luna walked up to Harry, examining him for a moment before asking, "How long has it been since you blinked?"

"I don't need to." Harry said, refusing to meet the girl's gaze anymore. "I still have things I need to do."

"You're exhausted." Luna said.

"I don't want to sleep." Harry argued, quietly. "And if I close my eyes at all, that's what will happen."

"No. But you'll have to, eventually. I'll let Maria know what happened. You should close your eyes again." Luna said.

"I can't." Harry said, glancing up towards the ceiling. "I've been fighting it every time I've needed to blink ever since I left the island. I can't stop now."

"Harry. Close your eyes." Luna ordered.

Harry's shoulders began to shake. "Just... let me do this my way. Please."

Tonks got up from where she was, wiping at her own eyes as she wrapped her arms around Harry. "Who are *you* trying to be strong for?" She asked, laughing through her tears.

"If I'm not..." Harry began.

"You don't have to be strong for us." Hermione said, putting a hand on Harry's back.

Ginny nodded, doing the same. "You've done enough. It's your turn to rest."

"Sleep, jackass." Pansy said, trying to keep her voice even.

"I... can't..." Harry muttered, staggering again. "I'm not..."

"Yes. You are." Luna said. "Thank you, Harry. For avenging him. For killing Palinsky. For bringing him back to me..."

"I wasn't able to save anyone..." Harry said, laughing weakly. "All that talk... and it took Leon dying to merge with my other half... only then did I get rid of the things that had been in our way. If I had done it from the start..."

"You can't think of it that way." Luna said. "Dwelling on the past is a terrible thing. After my mother died, I sat and stared at a picture of her for days on end. Finally, daddy had to sit me down and tell me it was alright to move on. That staring at a picture and wishing for a different fate wouldn't bring her back. Thinking of what you could have done were you capable of it won't change reality, Harry. So please... don't let this consume you."

"Luna..." Harry said, wobbling more now. His eyes were feeling wet again, defying his wish to never show such a weakness in front of anyone. "I'm... still sorry..."

He let himself blink, but only half completed the maneuver. It was only due to Flitwick's quick wandwork that he didn't hit the ground. Even with all the girls lunging to try and help him, he still fell hard. Flitwick let out a quiet sigh as he floated Harry into the bed next to Solieyu's.

"Thank you." Tonks said, smiling aside at Luna.

Shaking her head, Luna watched Harry sleep and replied, "I don't blame him for this. I never will. It was Palinsky who killed him. I... think that's what it took to finally draw the power out of Harry. To make him whole again. I just..."

Her voice broke. Four sets of arms quickly found their way around the girl as she broke down into tears again, unable to stop them this time.

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His eyes opened late one night. Slowly sitting up, he took in his surroundings quickly. Still in the hospital wing. No bodies on the beds around his. Wonderfully dark. Painfully silent. All save for the breathing of the person sitting in the chair next to his bed, anyway. Reaching for his glasses and slipping them on, Harry leaned back against the headboard.

"Looks like a peaceful night. Want to tell me what you're doing in here at this hour, Draco?" Harry asked, his voice feeling hoarse.

Draco Malfoy sat, leaning forward on his knees, a troubled look in his eyes. Hearing Harry's voice seemed to snap him out of whatever internal reverie he was having. Sitting up properly, he asked, "How're you feeling, Potter?"

"Whole. For the first time in months, I feel whole. Answer the question." Harry said.

"Trying to figure out what I should do." Malfoy said. He held up a pair of wands. "His mother and Lovegood both wanted me to take his."

"They gave you Leon's wand?" Harry asked.

"They want to, yes. They said I should take it because I tried to sacrifice myself for him. Been bothering me ever since." Malfoy explained.

"How long's it been?"

"Little over two days now." Malfoy stated. "I've kept myself away from everyone during the day and I've come up here at night. It's the only quiet place in the castle at the moment. I hope you don't mind."

"You going to accept the offer?" Asked Harry.

"Unsure. I don't think I deserve it. I wasn't able to do anything to save him. I have no right to wield it." Malfoy said, shrugging.

Harry nodded slowly. "...I felt similarly when Cedric's parents wanted me to have his wand. I figured, despite not being able to save him from death... the least I could do was to keep the wand active. As long as I use it to fight the evils of the world, I think Cedric's spirit will live on and be satisfied. Does that make sense?"

"More than you'd think." Malfoy said, eyebrows raising slightly. "I just feel Lovegood should be the one to take it. I barely knew him."

"And you were still willing to give your own life to keep his safe. I think that told them all they needed to know. It doesn't matter how well you know someone. The moment you decide to protect them with everything you have, things change. That's all there is to it." Harry said. "Take the wand, Draco. Let him keep fighting with us. Let him be there when we kill Voldemort."

Malfoy leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. He remained silent for a good while after that. Finally, he tucked the two wands away. "Everything's been in chaos since we got back."

"Oh?"

"They moved the dead out of here pretty early on. Reinhardt's mother took his body. I'm not sure if there's been a funeral. Like I said, I've stayed away from everyone since then. She didn't say anything when the headmaster called me to his office." Malfoy explained.

"I certainly hope Maria wasn't waiting for me." Harry said. "I'd decline the invitation to go."

"Oh? Doesn't seem like what you'd do." Malfoy said, glancing aside.

"I'll grieve for the dead when I feel they're truly able to rest in piece." Harry said. "After I end this war, I'll visit his grave. I'll visit the grave of everyone who's fallen because of this."

"Blaming yourself for the whole death count, Potter?"

"No. Merely the ones dying to protect me." Harry said, shaking his head. "Enough, though. Tell me what all's happened aside from that."

"Couldn't help you much, really. I've heard things in passing, but that's been about it. I've been eating in the Snake Pit since we got back." Malfoy said, shrugging crookedly. "Did hear the girls fuming last night, though. Apparently, someone had mentioned being glad that they didn't have to worry about a vampire running around the school anymore. Your woman damn near got herself expelled, you know. She was ranting pretty loudly about what she did to the guy. If he ever has children, I'll be surprised."

"Sounds like Nym's showing enough emotion for the both of us." Harry said, chuckling quietly.

"Still feeling guilty?" Asked Malfoy.

"No. Not anymore. Sleeping helped me gather my thoughts. It's gotten pretty easy to lucid dream these days. So I sat and I thought about things for awhile. There's no way I would have merged again unless something terrible had happened. It's a sad fact, but there's nothing I can do about it. Therefore, there's no use in being upset about what happened. I can't change it. And moping won't kill Voldemort. I'll rest when he's dead." Harry said.

"You sound different." Malfoy commented. "Your attitude towards things, I mean."

"I guess that's what happens when your personality is split in two. One dominant half takes control and after awhile, everyone just gets to thinking that's how you think. The more reckless of my two personalities was really the one I should have left in charge. Nym might not like it, but I've left the pacifist in me behind. He's dead along with everyone on the floating island of Azkaban." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"The Prophet's labeled you a danger to the wizard world, you know." Malfoy said, smirking faintly.

"The Daily Prophet is against me. No one saw that coming, I'm sure." Said Harry, his tone bland. "Do tell."

"Word got back to them of what happened at the Citadel. One of the Aurors had loose lips or something, I don't know. Anyway, half of wizarding Britain thinks you're a danger to society with that much power coursing through you." Malfoy said.

"They're right, of course." Harry said. "I'd love to test the limits of my power now that I'm whole again. Not sure where I'd go to do that, though."

"You could always go into where the Forbidden Forest was. I can't imagine you could hurt its feelings any more than you already have." Malfoy said.

"Too close. I dunno, I'll think of something." Harry said. "So... how is everyone?"

"Lovegood's doing surprisingly well. I don't think I've seen her cry once. The Weasleys have all been depressed, of course. Those twins seemed to think that Reinhardt was just shy of becoming an outright prankster. Pansy's been avoiding people nearly as much as I have." Malfoy said, gesturing vaguely.

"And Hermione?"

"...Granger and I decided - and by that, I mean she told me in no uncertain terms - that it would be best if we saw other people." Malfoy said, looking irritated.

"What? That doesn't sound like something she'd say. What's going on?" Asked Harry.

"Good question. I'd love to know where this came from. She certainly wouldn't tell *me*. So at this point, your guess is as good as mine, Potter." Malfoy said.

"So. Now what?"

"Feel like moving?"

"I wouldn't mind seeing the others." Harry said. "Wouldn't mind never having to lay in one of these beds again, too."

"Gonna walk or shift?" Asked Malfoy.

"Shift. Faster that way." Harry said. "Though I'm sure it'll freak everyone out. Seeya down there, Draco."

Harry closed his eyes and went to invoke the Patronus Armor. But as he did, the bed he was in suddenly collapsed under him as though something extraordinarily heavy had crashed into it from above. At the same time, three beds across the room exploded outright, sending a shower of debris flying through the room and shattering several windows. Shortly thereafter, the light in Madam Pomfrey's office flickered on and she came bursting out, looking bewildered.

"What on Earth has..." She began, before taking in the condition of her hospital. "Oh dear. I was afraid of this..."

"You okay, Potter?" Malfoy asked, one eyebrow raised as he looked down at Harry, who was looking utterly baffled.

"I... am not sure. Madam Pomfrey, what just happened? I tried to use the Armor so I could shift down to the Pit and sleep in my own bed. But... *THIS* happened instead." Harry explained.

Sighing, the hospital matron walked over. "Yes, I figured it might. I was hoping it wouldn't, but with *you*, that slim chance is the one most likely to occur."

"So what was it?" Asked Harry.

"Your power." Madam Pomfrey said, sitting on the bed next to Harry's after moving a bit of metal from it. "Or more specifically, your inability to control it. Albus has told me of what happened, and I put two and two together."

"But... okay, wait. So basically, this is a result of merging with my other personality, right?"

"Correct."

Harry frowned. "But I was able to control the flow of power on the island..."



"You were able to control a fraction of the power. You hadn't fully merged. That didn't finish happening until late last night. Right now, your body has probably lost all concept of how to control the ebb and flow of your magical power. Your wild magic has effectively returned to you in a stable form. But since the pool of magic has been expanded by such a great deal, it's going to be incredibly difficult for you to do things that once came naturally to you. Shifting, for example. I'd be surprised if you could manage a Lumos without blowing up a small classroom." Madam Pomfrey explained.

Raising his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, Harry exhaled harshly. "So basically, I'm going to be completely useless until I either reforge the Gauntlet or relearn everything from the ground up?"

"More or less. I'm sorry, Harry. The chances of this happening were incredibly low. But, as usual, you've managed to beat the odds." Madam Pomfrey said.

"Whether he wants to or not." Malfoy added, smirking.

"So, how are you feeling?" Madam Pomfrey asked, getting off the bed and kneeling down by Harry's collapsed bed and drawing her wand. "Heartbeat feel alright? Nothing aching?"

"I feel like someone threw me through a few dozen walls. Wouldn't mind some aspirin. Horse tranquilizers, maybe. A way to use my magic without causing the destruction of a small country, perhaps?" Harry suggested, scowling as he was prodded by the mediwitch.

"No need to act like that." Madam Pomfrey scolded. "Well, it seems you're alright. Typical, quick healing. Aside from the wild fluctuations with your magic, you seem to be perfectly fine, if a bit worn down. You're free to leave, so long as you don't try using magic. Best wait for daybreak and ask Albus what the best course of action is."

Getting up, Harry sighed. "Where are my clothes?"

"I'll fetch them." Madam Pomfrey said.

"Looks like you're walking back after all." Malfoy said, grinning.

"Oh, shut up." Harry said. "Looks like, for the moment, you're the strongest one here. Better not screw up if something happens."

"I screwed up once. I don't plan to let it happen again." Malfoy said.

After Madam Pomfrey returned, Harry excused himself behind a non-destroyed bed's curtain to change. Once done, the two left Madam Pomfrey to fix the hospital wing, which she said would only take a few minutes at most. Harry was a little wobbly and had to stop a few times to get his balance. Apparently, the overload of magical energy was doing strange things to his body and he was having a difficult time adapting. That's how he was viewing the problem, anyway.

Pushing open the door to the Pit, Harry entered after Malfoy. He told the blonde that since he was the only one of them capable of magically holding back a crowd, he could be the leader. But it wasn't needed, as no one but Tonks got up to rush over.

"Harry!"

"Easy, girl. I'm not back to full yet. Probably won't be for awhile..." Harry said, hugging Tonks and trying to keep her from crushing his windpipe.

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"Magic's acting up." Harry said. "Since merging, I've basically got an unstable supply of magic. I tried to use the Armor so I could shift down here. Ended up knocking the bed out from under myself and blowing up a few more across the room..."

"Oh dear. That could definitely be a problem." Hermione said, biting her lower lip.

"So, how are you feeling?" Asked Pansy.

"Been better." Harry said, shrugging. "Got two questions for you people. One, why are some of you even *here* at this hour? And two, where are the missing ones? I'm going to assume 'sleeping' is the correct response there."

"If Ginny's with Dean, probably not." Hermione said. "I think Luna's in Ravenclaw Tower, though. Whether she's asleep or not is anyone's guess."

"How's she been?" Harry asked. "Draco's told me a little about what's been going on, but..."

"She seems alright. After Mrs. Reinhardt visited, we all sat around and cried for awhile. But ever since then..." Hermione trailed off.

"She's been strong." Pansy finished. "Keeps asking Draco to take Solieyu's wand."

"Yeah, he told me. I think I talked him into it. We'll see, though." Harry said. "...Not to be a downer, but I really am tired still. Only reason I came down was because I hate those hospital beds. Plus it smells too...sterile up there."

"We were just waiting for Draco to come back." Pansy said. "I could do with a bit of sleep myself. Been a long week."

"Yeah. Anyone know if Leon's going to be having a funeral or something?" Asked Harry, glancing around the room.

"If he is, Luna hasn't mentioned it to us." Hermione said. "Best ask her tomorrow."

Harry nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Sorry for showing up only to go to bed again."

"Stop apologizing." Pansy said, swatting Harry on the arm as she walked by. Yawning, she added, "It's all you ever do these days."

Everyone filed out, with Malfoy claiming Slytherin had gotten a lot quieter - and a lot safer - since he and his friends had beaten the group of would-be Death Eaters. One less thing to worry about. But the lack of Luna was somewhat bothersome to Harry. He hoped she wasn't up in the Nest, crying herself to sleep. Even before he had awakened, he had been worrying about her. As he and Tonks headed into the bedroom, he let out a sigh.

"What's wrong?" Asked Tonks.

"Worried. Too much to think about." Harry said, throwing himself back on the bed.

"Wanna talk about it, then?"

"...After I sleep. If it's all the same to you, anyway."

Tonks nodded. "Whatever you want to do. I'm just glad you're alright."

"I won't be 'alright' for some time, I'd imagine. But I'll survive." Harry said.

"Sounds familiar."

"Yeah."

Harry finally moved, positioning himself properly in bed to slip under the covers. As Tonks crawled in next to him, draping her arm over his chest, he asked, "Do I seem the same?"

"What?"

"Do I seem the same to you?" He repeated.

"You don't seem any different... why do you ask?"

Shaking his head, Harry closed his eyes. "No reason. Let's get some sleep."

Tonks frowned at him. "...Yeah."

Harry feigned drifting off as Tonks settled in and went to sleep herself. His eyes then opened again. Malfoy said he did, Tonks said he didn't. So what did that mean? On one hand, it could simply be a time difference. He was talking to Malfoy a lot longer than he had been with Tonks. She hadn't heard his view on things yet. Maybe it would change in the following days, when it became apparent that he had taken an apathetic outlook on the world. He only had one goal now, and it was one that he had been striving toward for so long that he hadn't given his actual future any real thought. Despite this, a few

ideas had slipped through here and there. One thing was certain, though.

When he killed Voldemort, he was going to disappear from the wizarding world.

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Author's Notes: We're closing in on the end of book six. And what a journey it's been. The better part of a year and across two computers. I hope everyone's enjoyed the ride, because it's coming to a close soon. I still haven't decided if I want to continue with an eighth book in the R-Series or move on to something else. I suppose we'll see when the end gets a little closer, huh?

Here, we've seen that Harry's effectively rendered himself useless. Completely unable to perform even the most basic of magical spells without his wild magic triggering in unexpected ways. It's a good thing, therefore, that he can forge the Gauntlet, no?

I'll see you next time, everyone.

## Chapter 25 – Diminished Light

In the month that followed, Harry slowly regained slight control of his magic. But this still only allowed him access to the most basic of spells. It would have annoyed him more than it did, but he found himself feeling indifferent to the matter. After all, he had the components needed to forge the Gauntlet of the Magi now. It was just a waiting game until all the parties who wanted to be there could converge. Scrimgeour was still having issues regarding the attack on London that had occurred earlier in the year. In addition, several other figures of power had started to come out of the woodwork, requesting to be present for such a unique event.

If it were up to Harry, he would have undergone the process the day after waking back up. He had been fine, after all. But it just wasn't to be. Balthazar, while not suffering from the constant energy drain, still had to recover his own strength. The forging process, he had warned, would put a great deal of strain on the both of them.

The only thing of note that had taken place in the time since the raid on Azkaban had been Solieyu's funeral. Despite what he had told Malfoy, Harry did, in fact, attend. And while everyone around him had cried a good deal, Harry couldn't see why anymore. There was nothing to be done about it. Crying would solve nothing. Only through their actions could they prevent something like Solieyu's death from happening again.

The event had been a quiet ordeal with only a few dozen people attending. Some of them were obviously Solieyu's family, including what must have been his father, Trevor. He had been one of the last to arrive and seemed conflicted about why he was even there. Maria had rushed over to him, catching him off guard. Harry hadn't paid much attention after that. It was their business, though he did think it would be nice if they would get back together, if only to keep Maria from being lonely.

Everyone eventually went up to the casket to say their goodbyes to Solieyu, who looked healthier in death than he had in his last few years of life. When it was Harry's turn, he had walked up to the coffin

slowly. Gazing down at his friend, he had merely smiled and whispered, "You'll be there with the rest of us, in the end, laughing."

Harry had left shortly after that, not wanting to see his friend being lowered into the ground. He would return after he finished the fight.

In regards to Solieyu's wand, Malfoy had accepted the offer set forth by Maria and Luna. He had spent a good deal of time getting used to using two wands. Harry had finally dragged him into the training room to show him how he did things. It was made more difficult by the fact that Harry couldn't actually fire any spells. It didn't seem to matter much in the end, though, as Malfoy claimed his way of fighting differed from Harry's. He was more up close and personal, whereas Harry was better at range.

Malfoy's long-hidden relationship with Hermione had dissolved even further in the time since the attack on the Citadel. Harry had seen Hermione on the arm of some Gryffindor boy he didn't know. And while Malfoy acted as though he didn't care, Harry caught sight of white knuckles caused by gripping a goblet too tightly. It said a great deal of the self control that Malfoy had taught himself that he hadn't yet attacked the Gryffindor.

Luna was handling things far better than anyone expected. In fact, she was one of the very few who *hadn't* been crying at Solieyu's funeral. She had consoled Maria off and on until Trevor's appearance, but she had remained stoic in the matter. She seemed to view the situation as Harry did - that crying wasn't going to solve anything anymore. A few times, Harry had seen Luna coming out of the training room, drenched in sweat and looking highly satisfied. Whatever spells she was slinging into the practice dummies, they were splintering them quite well.

Voldemort's whereabouts remained unknown. The Citadel had been constantly monitored since the attack on it, including a few trips into the structures of the island. No sign of the Orb that was keeping the place aloft, however. So, at least for the time being, the flying island holding the Citadel was stuck, motionless, in the air.

Slowly, Harry and Balthazar began opening up to one another. And the things that the ghost had relayed to Harry weren't good.

Especially concerning Voldemort's future plans. He had finally expounded on what he had meant about Voldemort meddling with the undead. As it turned out, the Dark Lord had had his best men in Germany for months, which explained why all the Death Eaters they had encountered recently were so quickly put down. They were there to dig up the corpses of the dead to use in a slew of unholy experiments. From all Balthazar had told him, these revolved around reanimation in various forms. Harry couldn't help but wish that Boris was still alive. There was no telling if the things Balthazar was saying would have sounded similar to what Boris had seen his former master performing.

One day, toward the end of term, Harry approached Dumbledore to ask something that had been nagging him for some time now. He caught the headmaster just after lunch, when most of the students in the Great Hall had filed out.

"I have a question." He said.

"Oh? And what might that be?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Where am I going this year? Surely not back to Number Four. The wards are dead along with most of my family. So where am I going?" Harry asked.

"I figured you would approach me sooner or later about this. No, Harry, you will not be going back to Vernon Dursley this year. In fact, I wish you to be as far from him as you can be from this point on. You will be returning to Number Twelve this year, as will your friends. While we still have no leads on Voldemort, we are not willing to risk anyone more than necessary." Dumbledore said.

"And the Gauntlet?"

"As it stands, I believe we have a date set. It will be a few days after the end of term. But I ask this of you, Harry - please tell no one of when you will be undergoing this process. If at all possible, I would like to spirit you away at night. We will be performing the process in my quarters, which I feel will provide the safest possible environment. I know you have been waiting a long time for this, and I once again



apologize. Rufus is only just finally getting a real break from a constant barrage of work." Dumbledore explained.

Harry nodded. "Understandable. Thanks for being honest with me."

"Of course. I think after all that has happened recently, it is the very least I can do."

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Just under a week before the end of term, Dumbledore called Harry up to his office. When he arrived, it was to find the Minister talking with the headmaster, a small crate sitting on his desk. Harry frowned as he crossed the room. When he got closer, he saw that the crate was filled to the top with wands.

"Are those...?" Harry began.

"Almost one hundred wands needed to forge the Gauntlet." Scrimgeour said, nodding. "It's taken awhile, but I've finally collected what we needed. As predicted, many came forth to help. They all seemed to want to contribute something. They all wanted you to let their families continue to live on."

"You said 'almost'..." Harry said.

"Unfortunately. We're two short." Scrimgeour said, sighing.

Harry stared down at the box, eyes narrowing slightly. "...I have Cedric's. Draco has Leon's."

"The wands will be destroyed in the process." Dumbledore said, his voice quiet. "Balthazar has told me as much."

"Out of the question, then." Harry bit down on the inside of his lower lip softly, thinking. There was... *one* plan he had, but... "If I might make a request?"

"Of course." Said Scrimgeour.

"I'd like to use Ravenclaw's Staff instead. I... have another use for these wands. One far greater than the forging process. I can do it this way, but not the other. In other words, I can't use the staff for what I have planned." Harry said slowly.

"Oh? And what might you have planned for almost a hundred wands?" Dumbledore asked, eyebrows raised.

"I've done a lot of thinking since the mission to Azkaban." Harry said, crossing the room to look out one of Dumbledore's windows. "Voldemort escaped somehow. So I thought 'well, maybe I just need a way to keep him in place next time.' I started searching after that. I found a possible answer in one of the books Sirius gave me, though it was a work of fiction. The theory is sound. But no one's ever been able to replicate the technique. It takes immense amounts of power to even use. And it takes a hundred wands as well. Seems that number's got some kind of mystical connotation to it. It kept popping up. I don't know if it's in relation to the sheer power one would normally need to use the spell or not..."

"You're banking on using a theoretical spell to harm Voldemort?" Scrimgeour asked. "That's a little hard to believe, Harry. Even for you."

"I'm not going to harm him." Harry drawled.

"Harm, kill, whichever." Scrimgeour said, shrugging.

"I'm not going to kill him, either. That's far too kind." Harry said, turning to look at the two men, a calculated grin rising on his face. "I'm going to send him somewhere he'll suffer for the rest of eternity. Somewhere he can't free himself from."

A shadow crossed Dumbledore's face for the briefest of moments before he cleared his throat and asked, "So what is this spell, Harry?"

"I'm not willing to say just yet. As there's a lot of work that needs to be done to it first. I need to alter it. Currently, there's... some unwanted backlash on the caster that I need to figure out how to deal with." Harry said, glancing off.

"Unwanted backlash? What *kind* of unwanted backlash?" Asked the Minister.

"In the story, the wizard Elias used the spell to send his nemesis into a void between realms, so to speak. The trouble is, the spell also served to kill Elias at the same time. He sacrificed himself to save his planet. But I'm not quite that altruistic. I have no intention of dying anytime soon." Harry said. "And there's the matter of being able to even use that many wands at once. It's something I wouldn't be able to test until after I get the Gauntlet on, to be sure. I'll also need to find the extra wands needed..."

"I do not want you putting all your hope in this, Harry." Warned Dumbledore. "Trying to realize a hypothetical spell in a work of fiction is a difficult, if not impossible, thing to do."

"Oh, there are backup plans. This would just be the simplest." Harry said. "It isn't the only thing I've thought of using. But it has the highest success rate. Trying to outright kill Voldemort would be difficult at this point. And I don't like what Balthazar has told me of Voldemort's goings-on in Germany. If he's trying to turn himself into some kind of lich, it's going to make killing him even harder."

"I don't even want to think about that possibility." Scrimgeour said, sighing. "Hopefully, it won't come to that. But Albus has told me his Order haven't witnessed the Death Eaters doing anything noteworthy yet."

"Let us pray it remains that way and Tom gives up on whatever ideas he has." Dumbledore said.

"Probably not going to happen." Harry said. "So it's a good idea if I got some information on dealing with liches at some point. Just in case. It never hurts to be overly prepared, right?"

"Right you are." Said Dumbledore. "Well then, I think we are done here for the moment. Where will you be putting the wands, Harry?"

Walking over to pick up the crate, Harry winced slightly. "Heavy..."

"Do you need help?" Asked the headmaster.

"Not the type of heavy I meant." Harry said, sighing. "...As for what I'll do with them, I have my ideas. Again, it's something I won't be able to accomplish until after the Gauntlet is reforged."

Scrimgeour nodded slowly. "You're bearing a great burden in your arms right now. Those wands all belonged to people killed by Voldemort's forces. The box is light, but the true weight isn't."

"Exactly." Harry said. "Alright, I'll get going. Store these wands in my truck where I know they'll be safe and whatnot. Is that all, sir?"

"It is." Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded and left with the box of wands. His Occlumency was getting stronger, he thought as he descended the spiral staircase, if Dumbledore didn't call him out when he said he had other plans. There was only one method to getting rid of Tom and he wasn't going to change course for anyone or anything. He had been a thorn in Harry's side for too long. Simply killing him wasn't enough. He was going to ensure that he would scream in torment for the rest of eternity.

Watching the gargoyle slide back in place as he left the door at the bottom, a dark grin passed over Harry's face.

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The night before the end of term, Harry found himself walking Hogwarts' hallways at a little past midnight. Sleep hadn't been coming easy lately. He simply had too much on his mind to be resting. That and his right arm was aching, as though fearing the forging process. No amount of flexing or moving kept it from hurting. Eventually, he cut off the pain receptors to that arm. It took a bit more energy than he liked burning, but it was better than hurting all the damned time.

It was odd, really. Things related to his Occlumency hadn't acted up. In fact, they seemed to have gotten stronger. Which, in retrospect, was quite good. The last thing he needed was to accidentally blow up his own head.

Whether by fate or chance, Harry found himself outside the path leading up to the Nest. He hadn't gone up there for quite some time. Not since Solieyu and Luna had unofficially made it their getaway spot. But a bit of fresh night air sounded good to Harry. It was a nice enough night out, after all. Slipping his hands into his pockets, Harry ascended the stairs leading up to the trap door.

He paused once underneath it. Pulling a hand out, he knocked softly.

"It's not locked." Came Luna's voice from the other side.

Pushing the door up, Harry stepped up into the small tower. "You're up late."

"So are you." Luna replied, smiling at him. She was sitting on the couch.

Throwing himself back into the chair, Harry glanced outside. "Peaceful tonight. So what brings you up here?"

"My thoughts, mostly." Luna said. "And you?"

"Same." Harry said. "Care to share?"

"Oh, it's nothing important." Luna said. "Just wondering what life would have been like if I hadn't befriended the people I did."

"Less chaotic, certainly." Harry suggested, his tone dry. "But who wants that? Normalcy is boring."

Grinning, Luna nodded. "That was the conclusion I was coming to. And though it's been painful at times, I don't think I'd trade it for anything. What about you? What's keeping you awake?"

"Mostly what Voldemort is doing in Germany. I haven't felt a bloody thing in ages. That worries me. Not so much because I'm afraid I won't be able to stop him - that isn't an issue anymore. Or it won't be soon, anyway. I'm more worried for everyone else. The people I can't get to in time." Harry said, gesturing to his side as he gazed back out over the grounds. "I'm not so foolish to believe my merger with the Gauntlet will go seamlessly. In fact, Balthazar has told me that it's

going to likely take awhile to get back to where I was before I merged with my other half..."

"And you don't want to let down anyone?"

"I don't want them to die." Harry said, shrugging crookedly. "Once I get back to where I was - once I hit full power and can channel all of my magic the way I want to - Voldemort's as good as dead."

"It's just a matter of hoping for the best until that point." Luna said, nodding.

"I'm aware I can't save everyone." Harry continued. "But that doesn't mean I want to stop trying. Every person killed by Voldemort, his Death Eaters, or any of his other science projects will be avenged in the end. The Susceptor will ensure that."

"The Susceptor?" Luna asked.

Blinking, Harry shook his head quickly. "Uh... nothing. Sorry. I was rambling. I get like that sometimes these days. Side effect of finally being me again. I have a lot of catching up to do and a lot of thoughts to sort through..."

"You really have changed." Luna said, leaning forward slightly.

"Have I? I've asked, but no one's really said anything. I certainly *feel* different." Harry said, frowning.

"You're more collected and you haven't joked very much. And it seems you're much more cynical of the world around you." Luna said.

Harry tilted his head for a moment before sighing. "I suppose I have been. But that isn't anything I can help. I am who I am now. This is who I should have been from the start. I suppose this is also a side effect of failing so much."

"You haven't failed." Luna said, frowning. "You know I don't blame you or Draco for what happened to Solieyu."

"Perhaps not. But I still hold myself responsible." Harry said. "Their lives were in my hands because we were there on a mission I had to get done. Whatever else I might say to the contrary, I'll never forgive myself for what happened on that island, Luna. I'd appreciate it if word of that didn't get back to anyone else."

"Why is it okay for me to know, but no one else?" Asked Luna, brow creasing.

Letting his head tilt back against the chair, Harry murmured, "Because it's different with you. I feel as though I failed you, personally, by failing to keep the one you loved alive. I realize that might sound silly, as most of the people who went out there didn't return. And most of them had plenty of loved ones to mourn their loss. The rational part of my brain understands this and tells me there's nothing to be done for it. The irrational part of my brain, and possibly a remnant of the old me, tells me that I could have prevented a lot of grief by coming to grips with my own fears sooner. And while that's certainly true, I don't like thinking about it."

Luna moved, sitting on one arm of the chair so Harry could stop avoiding her gaze as much. "You know what your problem is?"

"Oh... I could think of a few ways to answer that, I'm sure. The first thing that comes to mind, though, is 'problem'? Not 'problems'? I think I have more than one problem, Luna." Harry said, looking outside again.

"Your problem," Luna continued, ignoring Harry, "Is that you think too much. Haven't you said that once this war is over, *then* you'll let yourself grieve?"

"Yes. What of it?" Asked Harry.

"So don't think about Solieyu, those men, or anyone else until that time comes." Luna said.

"Easier said than done, I'm afraid." Harry said, shaking his head. "I can't imagine Draco's having an easier time than I am, though. He was actually there to witness the moment of death itself."

"And yet, despite all of what's undoubtedly on his mind, he decided to take our offer up." Luna said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "So what does that say?"

"Well, it says he has a stronger resolve than I do, for one thing." Harry muttered.

"It says that he's willing to not let this eat him away inside." Luna said, squeezing Harry's shoulder gently. "And that you're allowed to remember the past and not work yourself up over something that can't be changed."

"...Yes, I know." Harry said, closing his eyes. "But it's still hard sometimes. I try not to let anyone pick up on it. You and Stargazer are the only ones I've talked about this to so far."

"Sometimes it helps to do that." Luna said.

"True. So who have *you* talked to to do that with? I can always lend an ear if you want to talk, you know." Harry said, finally looking to his left.

"I know. But I keep in touch with Solieyu's mother regularly. It's helped quite a lot. She's doing better. She and his father might be getting back together, but she isn't sure yet. She's also decided she wants to continue living where she is instead of moving elsewhere." Luna explained.

"Memories can be hard to let go of. If there's anything truly good that came from this whole mess, though... it's that the school seems to have finally come to terms with Leon and what he was. At least in death, it's nice he's finally been accepted. It's just a shame it didn't happen sooner." Harry said.

Luna nodded. "It really is."

"So... mind if I sit up here and think with you for awhile?" Harry asked. "There's still a lot on my mind. We'll probably end up sleeping through most of tomorrow if we stay up all night, but..."



Smiling, Luna replied, "I'd love to have some company. The night's always a little less dark with someone else there."

Smiling back, Harry glanced outside into the night again. Darkness and light, huh? Seemed to be a running theme in his life. Especially lately. And while his own light may have been temporarily diminished, it would get stronger again. It would return to full force and shine brighter than it ever had. And when that happened...

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Hopping off the Hogwarts Express, Harry winced as he stretched. "Bloody train seats. Why can't someone design the damned things for comfort?"

"Because no one expects anyone to sleep for that long in that awkward a position, dear." Tonks said, her voice bone dry as she passed by him.

"What can I say, I was tired." Harry said. "Be glad I didn't fall asleep on my dinner plate."

"It would have been a memorable end of the year moment." Luna said, grinning as she stepped off of the train.

"That idiot with the camera from Gryffindor probably would've sold pictures of it to the Prophet if it had happened." Harry scowled. "Let us all be grateful I stayed awake."

"Colin's had that camera confiscated a few dozen times in the last few years." Hermione said, joining her friends. "It got so much worse when he hit puberty and started trying to rig the stupid thing in places it shouldn't be."

Tonks snorted. "He get a picture of you in your underwear, Hermione?"

"Me and most of the other Gryffindor girls before someone found him out. I don't think I've ever seen McGonagall lay into someone that hard. It's a wonder he didn't get outright expelled. I think we all felt bad for him afterwards. Why we did, I'll never know. I've never

wanted to strangle anyone until I met him." Hermione said, looking somewhat confused.

"We're missing a few." Harry observed.

"Malfoy and Pansy were hanging back to talk to Blaise, I think." Tonks said. "Dunno where Ginny is, though I'm sure we can all take a wild guess."

"I'd rather not, thanks." Hermione said. "I've already seen more than I want to know. Honestly, why anyone thinks they can get away with things like that in the school library is beyond me."

"Man, if Ron knew what was going on, Dean would be in trouble..." Harry pondered aloud.

"Oh, he's tried to rough Dean up a few times, believe me." Hermione said. "It didn't take many times before Ginny confronted him about that. She can be scary when she's mad."

"Gets it from her mother, I'm guessing?" Harry asked.

"Mrs. Weasley is a saint in comparison." Hermione replied, shaking her head quickly. "Because Mrs. Weasley never swore like a drunken sailor or threatened bodily harm."

"So..." Tonks said, glancing around. "What's everyone gonna be upto this summer? Assuming we all don't wind up directly on Grimmauld Place by sun-up tomorrow, I mean."

"Hard to say." Hermione said. "I'm sure it's going to take some doing to convince my parents to travel via Floo again... and I'm not sure apparating would be any better."

"Shame they can't shift." Harry stated, nodding sagely.

"Shame *you* can't shift." Tonks corrected, playfully flicking Harry's forehead, causing him to yelp in a highly undignified way.

"Daddy and I are probably going to head straight for Number Twelve." Luna said, looking thoughtful. "I haven't really spent too much time there. I hear there's still a lot of strange things lurking..."

"Yeah. No matter how much we clean the place, a new set of oddities moves in the next day. You'll probably have a blast." Harry said. And then, tilting his head far to one side, he quietly added, "I wonder if Mrs. Weasley'll give me a reason to duct tape her to the ceiling. It's going to be sad if I don't. Sirius would smack me upside the head if I didn't..."

"You're *still* wanting to do that?" Tonks asked. "What are you, ten?"

"Hey, don't act like you don't wanna see it happen." Harry said. "Remember all the things she said to you after I left that one time. What the hell did she call you again?"

"A 'scarlet woman,' if memory serves." Tonks replied. "That's rich, coming from someone with that many kids. It's not a clown car..."

Harry snorted, as did Hermione, who quickly tried to cover it up with a cough.

"You'd better not let any of the Weasley kids hear you say that." Hermione stated, covering up her slip-up quickly. "Fred and George alone..."

"Yeah. They still have our list. And using it as a basis for most of their products, if the rumors are true." Harry said. Glancing over his shoulder, he sighed. "It's starting to get late. ...Well, 'later,' really. Nym's mother should be waiting for us by now. Wouldn't surprise me if Moony came along."

"You guys go on, then. I may need to hijack Luna long enough to disengage Ginny from Dean. I'm sure we'll see each other in a few days, though." Hermione said.

"Probably." Harry said, getting his cart and making a face. "Why don't we just shrink all this crap before leaving school? Honestly..."

"Because *some* of us don't have parents or relatives who can legally change them back." Said Hermione, one eyebrow cocked.

"You're saying they couldn't put a timer on it?" Harry asked.

"I'm saying it would be embarrassing to get stuck in traffic or something and suddenly be naked after your clothes ripped up due to your belongings unshrinking." Hermione said.

"... Point taken! Seeya in a few days, ladies." Harry said, waving as he and Tonks headed for the barrier.

"Goodbye!" Luna called. "Have fun!"

As they got a little farther away, Tonks giggled. "She's going to map Number Twelve within an hour of arriving."

"Oh, I have no doubt she will." Harry said, chuckling. "So, Nym, what do you wanna spend the next couple of days away from Grimmauld Place doing?"

"Dunno..." Tonks said. "Haven't really thought about it much. It'll be nice to sleep in my own bed again, though."

"There's no place like home, huh?" Harry asked.

"Something like that." Tonks said.

Grinning, Harry glanced aside and asked, "What if Moony and your mum are... y'know?"

"...Man, I don't wanna think about that. ...Oh damn it all, now I can't help it! Harry, you *jackass*. Why'd you have to make me think about it?!" Tonks whined.

"Because it's fun seeing you make faces while the idea sinks in." Harry said, smirking. "You get this cute little expression just before it's replaced by total horror."

"Harry, you realize that the minute I stop pushing this cart, I'm gonna smack you, right?"

"You'll have to catch me first. Wench."

"Wench?! I'll wench you, you jackass!"

"You'll wench me? What does that even *mean*?!"

Heads tilted, Luna and Hermione watched the arguing couple vanish through the barrier. Turning to one another, the two girls simply shrugged.

"Come on. Let's get the lovebirds split apart before they wind up on the return trip." Sighed Hermione. "Hopefully we don't catch them doing anything embarrassing."

"We're friends with Harry. Haven't you learned our chances at things like that are amazingly low? We'll be lucky if they have clothes on." Luna said, crossing her arms behind her head.

"If they are, I'm going to find Draco and make him float the both of them out onto the platform. That'll teach them." Hermione stated.

"Mean streak, huh?"

"You have no idea."

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Author's Notes: And so, book 6 unofficially comes to an end. I say 'unofficially' because I hate ending on odd numbers. So I've decided that instead of a side story, I'll just add an epilogue. But what could the epilogue be about? Well, we aren't going to see Harry or his friends in it. So does that mean we'll be seeing the Hogwarts staff? Perhaps members of the Order? Possibly Scrimgeour and his new, secret prison? Nope! Well, that only leaves us a few more options, doesn't it? Take a guess - it'll be fun! What do YOU guys think the epilogue will be about? And more importantly, WHO will it be about?

I'd like to thank everyone for sticking with the R-Series. Especially this year. I can't believe it's been so long since my old PC died back in August of '07. It took awhile, but I think I made up for the unwanted hiatus.

This also marks the LONGEST book in the R-Series so far. By a good deal, in fact. After I post chapter 26, check my profile page out. If I can remember to do it, I'll throw up the numbers of each book in the R-Series, how many words are in them, add in the Gaiden fics, then tally the total number up. If I haven't broken half a million words by now, I'll be shocked.

I'll seeya in the epilogue, kids.

## Chapter 26 – Beyond The Boundaries

*"I built it... for the unwanted."*

A messenger strode through the darkened hallways of the labyrinth-like city, a note clutched in his clawed hand. He had pried it from the dead hand of one of his oldest friends, who had been found slumped at his post. It bode ill of things to come. The note itself was written in a strange script, one the messenger had never seen before. But then, he wasn't paid to. He was a simple messenger and nothing more. He relayed things to and from the King. Finding a dead guard, and a personal acquaintance at that, at the entrance was a bad omen. There were signs of an extended struggle. The message was written in blood. Whose, the messenger didn't want to find out.

*"I built it... for the unaccepted."*

Rounding a corner, the messenger was halted by a pair of guards. A quick exchange later and he was on his way again. The guards hadn't seen nor heard anything. That made the death even more bizarre. Why would someone slaughter a guard and then not try to enter the city he was guarding? And what the hell had he used to fight with? Clearly, this wasn't a wand fight. His friend, while not amazing with a wand, was certainly good enough to do his job quite well. But he had literally been found in pieces. It hadn't been a pretty sight. But then, reasoned the messenger, at least he had found what they were all searching for. He had found peace.

*"I built it... for the undead."*

Pushing through a pair of large, double doors, the man strode into a large, circular room. A number of doors lined the walls, each with a set of guards on either side of it. They were merely for show, of course, as the man in the room's center needed no guards. But it helped his people rest easily. Rest was so hard to get anymore. Any little bit helped. It was one of the many things he was willing to allow for his people. He sat on his throne day in, day out, listening to news of the outside world and instructing his men on what to do. He sat and he waited, as it was one of the few things he *could* do without

causing a panic. Everyone in the city respected him. He had offered them a home, after all, and he ensured their safety.

"My Lord." Said the messenger as he approached the stairs leading up to the throne. "I bring troubling news."

The man on the throne, Sergei Wagner, lifted his head. Through the blackness of his hood, two burning, red eyes could be made out. "Have the Death Eaters been spotted once more?"

"I do not know. But Belmot is dead, his parts strewn about the far northeastern entrance. I found this in one of his hands, my Lord. I do not know the writing, but I thought you might." Said the messenger, holding the note out.

Wagner took hold of it like one would take hold of a baby, as though any sudden movement would destroy it. Bringing it closer to his face, a silence fell the room as he read. "...This is not good. Damn that man and all he stands for! Have the warnings not been enough?!"

"My Lord?" Asked the messenger. "What is it? What has happened to my friend?"

"Belmot was killed by a Death Eater. One trying to send a message to me. Voldemort has arrived in Germany. He is personally overseeing a small force of his Death Eaters. Apparently the ones we sent back to him did not get the point across!" Hissed Wagner, clutching the note in his hand.

"What should I do, my Lord?"

Wagner looked at the messenger for a moment before quietly replying, "Tell the guards to spread the word. Though there has been nothing indicating Ur'terash has been infiltrated, there is no reason to believe it hasn't. I want everyone on patrol and checking in on those incapable of defending themselves. I will personally walk the halls of my city until I feel satisfied that nothing unholy than us has breached her corridors."

Nodding, the messenger turned and quickly went to spread the words to the guards around the room. Watching him, Wagner closed his



eyes and let out a low, rattling breath. It had been a long time since anyone dared try to push their luck with him. And while their peaceful lives existed only as far as they allowed themselves to forget their own situations, it was a peace that Wagner had hoped would maintain.

Unfortunately, Voldemort's mobilization and sudden presence in Germany had not been a good sign. Ur'terash was a vast city, connected with long tunnels underground. They lived in the dark because they were feared where the light could be found. They protected their home with their lives, as they were quite difficult to kill. Willing guards had been found quickly for a number of reasons. They wanted to give back to the man who had provided them sanctuary. But they also hoped that, some day, they would be killed in the line of duty. It was a peace that all of them wished for. It was a peace that none were likely to see.

Every wretched soul reanimated through foul magics was welcomed in this place. All sought protection from those who would do them harm and a method to end their eternal undeath. Unable to truly die, they were doomed to forever walk the earth. And whether their salvation came in the form of a cure or merely in a way to resume being dead, they didn't care. Necromancy at its most pathetic, the damned souls that walked Ur'terash worked day and night to try and end their own existence. And while the concept might not make sense to the living, the living were the reason that they had even come into being. They harbored deep-seeded hatred for both the truly living and the truly dead, for they could be neither until they found a cure.

Even the ruler of Ur'terash, the man who everyone in the city admired and respected, even Sergei Wagner was a victim of foul necromancers. One of the strongest men in all wizarding Germany during his life, Wagner had not been liked. He had used his magical strength to gain power. Power he had used to help govern the direction wizarding Germany had taken. When he died in 1884, parties were held far and wide.

But he hadn't been dead long when the necromancers had come for him. Assuming that his great power would have transcended death,

they sought to control Wagner as an inferius. Or, at the very least, something resembling one.

Wagner's memories from his life were few and far between. But the memories from the moment he had been brought back were clear even to this day. His eyes had snapped open and he had sat bolt upright on the rock slab he had been placed on. All around him, a group of necromancers stood, channelling through their wands to give him power. It had been a foolish mistake on their part.

Initially playing along, Wagner had quickly turned on the group, ripping out one's throat and stealing his wand. The remaining necromancers had tried to bind him, but the fury inside the man had overpowered it and he broke free. Quickly slaughtering those that had desecrated his corpse, Wagner had taken their belongings and dressed himself. The sight of his own rotting body had disgusted the man. Scanning the surrounding area, Wagner had found notes that the necromancers had made. He was soon horrified to learn that he hadn't been the only one to be set upon. This hadn't been a lone collection of overzealous necromancers. They were merely the pawns of a man by the name of Johann Ahrends, a powerful sorcerer who sought eternal life.

Instead, he had found eternal undeath. He wanted immortality through any means necessary, even if it meant becoming a lich.

Bloodlust still pounding through his cold body, the newly reanimated Sergei Wagner had set out then. He had a goal - he had to find Ahrends and make him suffer for his crimes.

It hadn't been difficult to hunt the man down. Like a moth to a flame, Wagner had seemed drawn to sites where other necromancers were gathering. It was a simple matter of following them back to their leader. Ahrends was holed up in a small castle in the middle of a frozen wasteland, his necromancers constantly entering and exiting.

Wagner had fought his way inside, as the long trip had provided him ample time to ensure that his wand skills hadn't deteriorated like his body. Though he had been too focused at the time to notice, Wagner later recalled catching glimpses of other undead experiments being worked on throughout the castle. Some chained to the walls, some

being dissected on cold slabs, some shambling back and forth into one another, their higher thought processes having not returned with their bodies.

Ahrends had destroyed most of the castle in the struggle that had ensued when Wagner had reached him. But the fight had ended with Wagner victorious. By some twist of fate, he had arrived the very night that Ahrends was planning to undergo his transformation into a lich. Wagner stole the completed phylactery and, after striking down Ahrends, went about undergoing the process himself. The pain he had felt during this time was greater than any he'd felt before or since. But he had somehow survived the ordeal.

He had survived and, he had quickly realized, his powers had grown far beyond anything he could have ever dreamed. The first thing he had used his new power to do was to gather the undead who had survived the assault on the castle. Because the power his transformation had given him had not gone to his head. He had been given a second chance.

This time, he wasn't going to screw things up. This time, he would make a difference.

He had gathered a small army of the undead eventually, as the years progressed. And finally, the idea was set out to stop their seemingly endless wandering. A plan to live in one spot of their own design. A place to try and live. A place to try and find an escape from their waking nightmare.

This had been the seed that had sprouted to become Ur'terash, Wagner's city of the undead. Its reach was vast and its fame widely known. Because while its entrances were carefully guarded, it was not impossible to hunt them down. The living world feared them, as Wagner's power had only grown over the years following his resurrection.

While his teams of undead worked on Ur'terash day in, day out, Wagner had left to seek out more help. He had sought out groups of necromancers, extinguishing their flames and rescuing those just brought back from the peace of death. He had offered them a home,

a place they would be surrounded by friends. A place where everyone understood the torment they were going through.

And as Wagner travelled, collecting more to live in his sanctuary for the undead, the city expanded. Not needing sleep and barely needing sustenance, the undead worked around the clock to ensure that Ur'terash would be big enough to house all those who wished to live there. The name of the city itself had come from one of the books a necromancer had been carrying on him. It had been a tome detailing the history of a long-forgotten god that the necromancers once worshipped.

Because, in some twisted way, Wagner had almost become a necromancer himself. He had to know the process involved in returning a soul to its rotting body and reanimating it. He had to know because he needed to find a way to reverse the process. The soul had to be removed while returning the body to death. It had been the one thing Wagner still had yet to accomplish. It was something that plagued him every day of his life.

Of course, he had heard of the famed Dementors of wizarding Britain. Everyone in the wizarding world had. Many communities had creatures similar to Dementors, but none were as effective as the original creatures. He had even heard of cases where Dementors, after sucking out a person's soul, had been driven away, leaving the soul to gently return back into its vessel. It was something that had intrigued Wagner for a long time. Unfortunately, his priorities had always been with the city he had founded and he never had the chance to investigate further.

But now? Now it seemed that the darkness lying within wizarding Britain was coming to him. It wasn't a prospect he found enthralling. For the better part of the year, off and on, reports had been coming in from his scouts that the foot soldiers of the dark wizard Voldemort had breached the boundaries of Ur'terash's territory. What they were doing was still unknown, but they had been seen trying to dig in grave sites and that had been enough for Wagner to send his men into action.

They had even captured a live one to bring back to Wagner, who had been pleased at this. The Death Eater had been tortured for weeks, but he wouldn't divulge any information. Finally, he had given the order to slowly kill the man. His men had been all too eager to do so. And while he tried not to be a violent man, he also couldn't allow himself to grow soft just because no one had attempted to assault Ur'terash in a good many decades.

And it was then, as the man was being pulled apart, that he had talked. Screams and babbles gave way to hate-filled speeches regarding the undead and Voldemort's plans to create an army of the undead that would be greater than even Wagner's. He was seeking out mass graves. He was digging up bodies to resurrect. If there was one thing Wagner couldn't stand, it was seeing the undead being used as tools. He had seen great numbers of inferi standing stock still for days on end unless someone got near them, at which point they would attack unrelentingly. His people would not fall victim to this.

While Wagner's name was well known, the location of his city was not. The local government was well aware that Ur'terash was located somewhere near their territory, but Wagner had never given its precise location to anyone. Only the undead could find it easily. And if Voldemort was planning to turn the dead into inferi, they could be used to find his city. If Lord Voldemort wished it, there was almost nothing stopping him from an invasion. And if two large armies of the undead were to merge for any reason, the living world would be in grave danger.

And although Wagner's hatred of the living had long since mellowed, he still focused anger on those who would seek to use his kind as puppets. As unthinkable as it was, the very real possibility of needing to contact the living world was starting to arise. Wagner was not so stubborn and foolhardy that he wouldn't ask for assistance, even if it meant forming an alliance with the living.

It was then that Wagner had stopped the Death Eater from being killed. He was missing a few parts and had been bleeding quite badly. But he hadn't been outright killed. No... death was something reserved for those who truly deserved its loving embrace. It was too good for a follower of Voldemort, someone who was so readily eager

to violate the sanctity of death. Why then should death be allowed to take him?

Ordering his men to quickly keep the Death Eater from dying, Wagner had told them to leave him where they had found him. They would then retreat and keep an eye on the location from a distance. Sure enough, the scouts had reported the man getting rescued by his fellow Death Eaters. Wagner had hoped it was enough to dissuade Voldemort's forces from getting closer. Clearly, he had been wrong. Sergei Wagner hated being wrong. He hated it almost as much as he hated those who didn't respect the dead.

But Voldemort would learn how great a mistake it had been to push his luck.

Whatever the future held, it promised to not be good in the least. But he would not allow his sanctuary to be intruded upon. He would send scouts to Britain and he would wait. No one angered Sergei Wagner, because the Lich King bowed to no man.